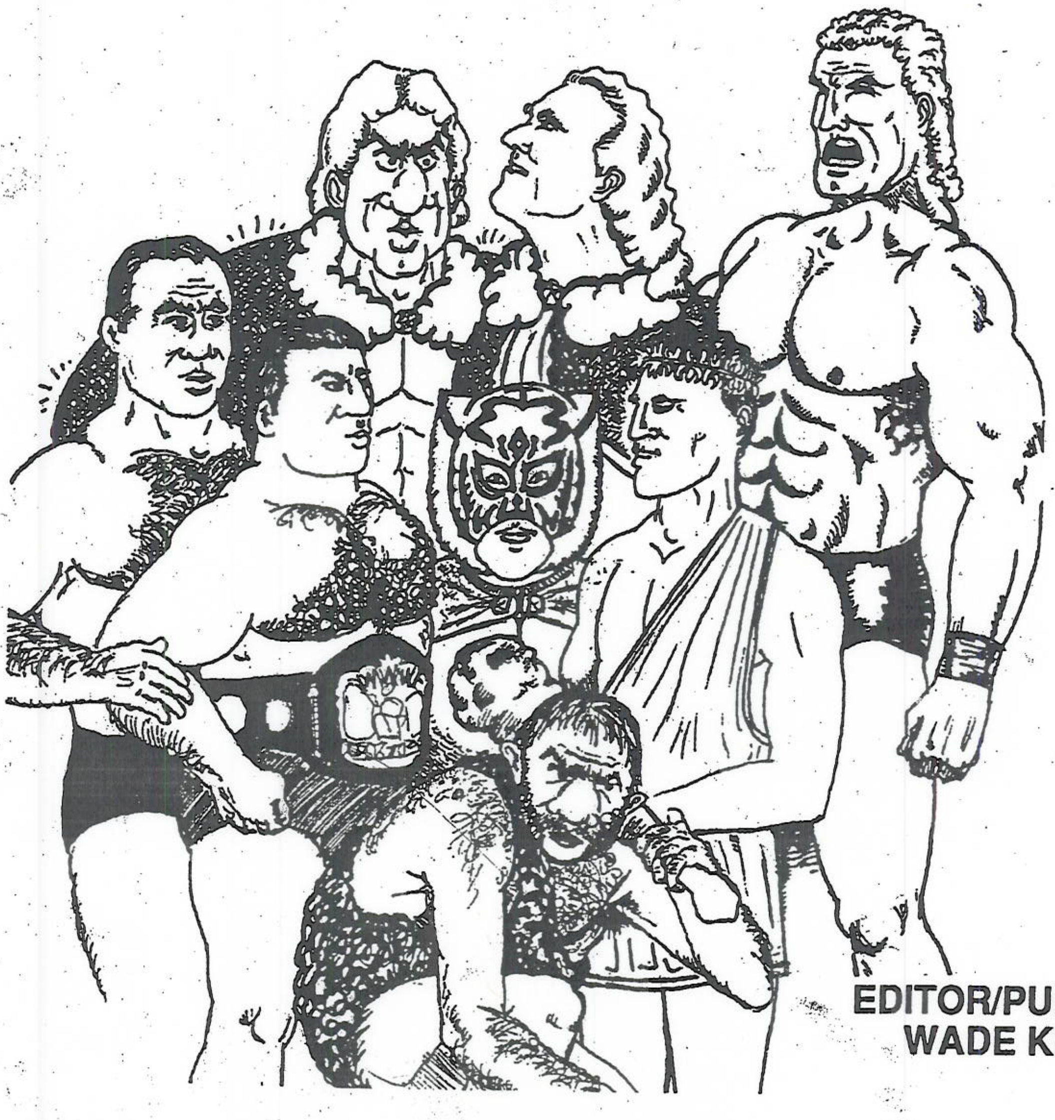
PRO WRESTLING
TORCH
ANNUAL IV
SUMMER 1991

"THE EVOLUTION OF PRO WRESTLING"



EDITOR/PUBLISHER:
WADE KELLER

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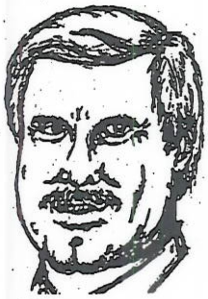
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the fourth *Pro Wrestling Torch Summer Annual*. This is the biggest *Torch* special yet. Besides the three previous Summer Annuals, there have been three Winter Yearbooks which were more oriented toward features reviewing the previous year in wrestling. The goal of the Annuals is to be as non-dated as possible with a theme of some kind. This Annual's theme is "The Evolution of Pro Wrestling."

What better way to examine the changes and developments of wrestling than to ask five of the most influential wrestlers of this century? Bill Watts, Roy Shires, Lou Thesz, Jerry Lawler, and Bruno Sammartino have all had unique careers in pro wrestling. Lou Thesz is regarded as one of the top wrestlers of all time, and probably the top wrestler of his era. He has seen wrestling go through several cycles and more changes than he could have ever imagined. As six-time NWA World Champion, he has wrestled the best wrestlers in every territory of the United States and all over the world. Roy Shires gained fame for his successful promotion in California, mainly in the San Francisco area in the 70s and 80s. When he was promoting, he was regarded by many as one of the smartest when it came to understanding the business of pro wrestling. Bill Watts studied under Roy Shires briefly when he wrestled in Shires's territory. Watts studied the sport intensely as a wrestler and is regarded as the top promoter of the eighties when it came to quality, exciting television shows. Watts's Mid-South weekly television programs of the mid-eighties are still regarded by many as the prototype for wrestling programming.

Just as Lou Thesz dominated the NWA while he was wrestling, Bruno Sammartino was the top man in the WWF during his career. Sammartino, on a month-to-month basis, is the all-time top draw on the East Coast. And no one will argue that Jerry Lawler has been the top man in Jerry Jarrett's Memphis-based promotion for nearly two decades.

Each of the five men interviewed for the "Torch Talk Collection: The Evolution of Pro Wrestling" have had very different careers and very different experiences with which to draw opinions about the changes in pro wrestling over the years. With careers based in Oklahoma, California, Tennessee, New York, and in Thesz's case, the world, each wrestler's perspective on the business was different from the other four. The rookie years of the wrestlers range from Thesz's in the mid-30s to Lawler's in 1968, so there is a large spectrum of periods in wrestling on which to reflect.

A lot of the things said in the interviews surprised me. A lot was expected. But most of all, I learned about the way wrestling has evolved over the years. I found the most interesting part of all five interviews was each person's opinion on what pro wrestling has become today.

But the "Torch Talk Collection" is not even half of the book. After the "Torch Talk Collection," *Torch Weekly* columnist and cartoonist Bill Kunkel's "Wrestling Illuminati" graces the next six pages. In this "Potshots" mini-comic book, Kunkel "reports" on the "real story" behind the WWF's exploitation of the Gulf War.

Following that is the section of reader written features including essays on *Torch* readers' "All-Time Favorite Wrestlers." Then in the spirit of "Fantasy Football" and "Fantasy Baseball" leagues comes three pages of "Armchair Booking Ideas" from the readers. This year, as opposed to letting the readers get by with presenting their ideas with no comment, I have added editorial comments after a few of the essays. One of the popular features in the weekly *Torch* newsletter is "Torch Top Ten Lists." The backlog of the top ten lists grew to huge proportions, so this Annual features five pages of "Torch Top Ten Lists," with apologies to David Letterman. And closing the reader written segment is the most popular of the reader features over the last four years, readers' "Most Memorable Moments."

The final section of the Annual contains seven "Feature Articles" by some of the top writers in pro wrestling today. First, *Wrestling Perspective's* editor Paul J. MacArthur has written an article which explains the history of pay-per-view and why wrestling companies would be smart to never totally rely on it as their sole source of income.

Torch Weekly columnist Bruce Mitchell has put together a tribute to Dan Shocket who was *Pro Wrestling Illustrated's* most popular writer until he died of cancer in 1985. Find out why Shocket was such a pioneer journalist as several of Shocket's articles are reprinted with comments from Mitchell. John Hitchcock, *Torch Weekly* cartoonist, adds his touch of sarcasm as he does a few parodies of the old wrestling magazines with a spoof *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* cover and a couple of mock advertisements. Thanks to Bill Apter and *PWI* for their permission to reprint some of Shocket's fine work.

Brian Hildebrand, who has managed in pro wrestling as "Jack Curtis" writes a first-person account of the time his face had the privilege of meeting the bottom of Bruiser Brody's boot. His article takes an insiders look at a young manager and a young wrestler (Cactus Jack) in their pre-card jitters and post-match elation.

Torch Weekly columnist Mark Madden has done extensive research to bring *Torch* readers the ten most influential events throughout Dusty Rhodes's childhood and adolescence that shaped the man you see today.

Chris Zavisa, author of *Torch Weekly's* "Japanese Highspots" column, has written a great article on one of wrestling's craziest wrestlers, Atsushi Onita of Japan. Onita's career is a rollercoaster of "blood, sweat, and tears," with a big stress on blood.

Eric Krol, a frequent contributor to various wrestling newsletters, takes an interesting look at WCW's two lines of trading cards.

Mick Karch, veteran wrestling announcer, has written a first-hand report of his experiences on a recent tour of Australia with the IWA promotion.

One of the truly unique articles on wrestling finishes this year's Annual. Joseph Perry, editor of *Turnbuckle: A Wrestling Forum*, presents an excellent fictional short-story based on a veteran wrestler's last match against one of his pupils.

There are so many people to thank for help in making this Annual the best *Torch* special thus far. I thank the five wrestlers who agreed to participate in the "Torch Talk Collection: The Evolution of Pro Wrestling," for taking time to speak candidly about their views on the evolution of wrestling. I thank the readers who contributed essays for the reader written articles. I thank the great crew of regular *Torch* contributors for their continued great work. I thank the other feature writers for their contributions. Thanks to *Torch* reader Joe Schnide for his help in my conversion from an IBM to a Macintosh, because without the Macintosh, the improved layout and appearance of this Annual would not have been possible. Thanks to the photographers who contributed their photos. And thanks to all the subscribers to *Pro Wrestling Torch Weekly* who have made producing all of the *Torch* publications so rewarding and fulfilling. I plan to be here for many years to come typing introductions to future Annuals and Yearbooks. And to most of you, the *Torch* visits your mailbox each week. Until next week or whenever next time may be, thanks for your support and thanks for reading.

Wade Keller

Wade Keller,
Editor/Publisher

TORCH TALK

"COWBOY" BILL WATTS

Bill Watts, known as "The Cowboy" by his fans, was one of those rare wrestlers that not only did their job in the ring, but studied the sport and business of pro wrestling. Mr. Watts was groomed by some of the great regional promoters of the sixties and seventies to follow in their footsteps. His love for the business and ability to absorb the art of promoting is in the elite of pro wrestling. In the following "Torch Talk" interview, Bill Watts discusses his roots in pro wrestling and how and from whom he learned about promoting. He also reveals his thoughts on the current pro wrestling scene with a critical eye. He is no longer involved in wrestling, but at only 51 years of age, he certainly is expected to someday resuface and be a promoting force in pro wrestling. So sit back, because Mr. Watts has a lot to say, and enjoy a long interview with one of the most respected names in pro wrestling...

BILL WATTS (1986)

WADE KELLER: How and when did you get involved in pro wrestling?

BILL WATTS: I began in 1962. Jack Brisco was going to college at Oklahoma State University and he went after me to get into pro wrestling. I went to Oklahoma University. He always thought I should get into pro wrestling, but all I'd seen at that time was what they had in Oklahoma under LeRoy McGurk which was mostly Junior Heavyweights and guys who were mostly over the hill. So none of us had ever been impressed. The only athlete that we recognized was Danny Hodge and Danny seemed to be so superior to everybody they had that I just wasn't a fan of pro wrestling.

KELLER: What finally sparked your interest in pro wrestling?

WATTS: Well, Wahoo McDaniels who played football at Oklahoma University and later pro, he was home one time and we were all out drinking. He cashed a check worth I think worth $500, and this was in the sixties. In college you were geared toward thinking if you could make $25,000 a year, you were really successful in business. So at $500, I wanted to know if it was a week's pay. He said, "No, that was for one match." And I said, gee, here I am knocking all these heads in bars as the guys were doing at the time. So anyway, after Jack's urging and Wahoo was wrestling in Indianapolis and Dale Ellis was wrestling at OU, he was getting ready to wrestle at Indianapolis, and the promoters asked me to come up there. Before that, I tried out with LeRoy McGurk's group and they didn't want to use me because I was a big heavyweight and they featured junior heavyweights. I got up there to Indianapolis. The guy that actually owned the Indianapolis territory at the time was Jim Barnette and he wasn't even there, they had a guy named Balk Estes. I went all the way up there and they really didn't have any place for me. They had a USFL-calibre pro team up there and a good friend of mine was the defensive coach and so he asked me to play on the team. And I asked the promoters if I got some publicity for the team, would they let me wrestle and they said yeah. So I played there on that team, which was the class team of the league. We did very, very well. We got some great publicity. Fortunately, this guy knew me and knew I had some pro football experience, so he kind of built the defense around me and let me call the defensive signals. I was playing nose-guard and defensive tackle a lot. Back then, often times the pro set was only a four man line and so we did really well and got a lot of publicity. And I was working out with a guy named Mark Starr and Dale Ellis working the weights harder and harder and finally I got to wrestle. The funniest thing is, I got my first actual match because Art Nelson who was part of the famous team, The Nelson Brothers, called me and said, "Take your bag with you when you ride down with Dale tonight to Portsmith, Ohio because I'm not going to show up and they'll have to let you substitute. So then I got a call five minutes later from Stan Nielson who said the same thing. They were the main event and they decided the town wasn't worth going to, all the way to Portsmith, and of course I didn't know any different. I thought, at least I got my first match. So that's how I got my first bout and that was in 1962.

KELLER: What are some of your earliest memories as a wrestler, the first couple months?

WATTS: Well, I wrestled Joe Blanchard somewhere in Indiana and that was a tough match. Joe was always in fantastic condition. Of course, one of the big stars I got to wrestle against was Don Leo Jonathan. I was just in awe of him. He was just so huge and so tremendously flexible and agile. Of course, I didn't realize the power that I had either. I was in a car-train wreck when I was playing football for Oklahoma. That's how I got on weights, by accident. You have to realize that when I was playing football back then for OU, first of all , I was the heaviest man on the team at 229. I used to weigh about 245 and was still growing, kids were changing. I was very young to be in school. I was in college when I was 17. Kids were starting to grow and they didn't realize it. They used to pull me down and all it did was make me so weak. But that's when they believed in football players being small and quick. Of course, they were dominating football with that pattern, but they didn't realize that guys were getting big. And they believed if you were big, you'd be slow. So it was killing me. Then I was in the car-train wreck and was unconscious for two weeks and came out of the hospital at 200 pounds. A friend of mine had been lifting weights, and I noticed the change in him and so he got me started in lifting weights. I was embarassed at how weak I was. But I stuck with it and got back to my normal body weight at 240. It took me six months to be able to do a simple somersault in a drill that they do in football and come up in what they call a normal hitting position. It took a long time to rehabilitate. I should have been dead. It's probably because it was the middle of football season when it happened and I was in such good shape that I survived the shock. It took the train several miles to stop after hitting me in the car. But anyway, I got on weights by accident and went from 240 to 315 pounds without steroids or anything. It was just the perfect growth age, my body really took to it. We really didn't even know what we were doing. Back then it was kind of learn by reading magazines and then working out and trying it. There was a guy who came back from the Marine Corp that was an Oklahoma boy who had really built up on weights. He had been training on the West Coast, which was far ahead as far as weight training. So we worked out extremely hard on them, like five hours every other day. And it just really took to us. I got so strong and so big and they really didn't know what to do with me. So I signed to be in pro football. It took me several years to get used to the new body weight. It's just a total transformation to go from 240 to 315, but I actually scaled down to 297 and that's where I stayed. I had the same quickness as when I was smaller, but I had all this tremendous strength, too. I was just beginning to realize that at that time I was a superman. I mean, there weren't very many 300 pounders in wrestling that could move.

KELLER: Who were some of the other big guys at the time that impressed you?

WATTS: Well, you had Haystacks Calhoun at 600,but he couldn't move. Then the next big guy who got into the business who could really move was Gorilla Monsoon. I was impressed with Don Leo Jonathan because he weighed about 308 and he could walk the top of the ring rope around the ring and he could do nip ups, or kip ups, and his was a natural strength. And he was a nice guy and an awesome guy and a fabulous athlete. Mark Lewin was a star at the time. The guy I think I was most impressed with was Dick the Bruiser. I mean, he was at his prime and he would just almost stop an audience in awe. He was just awesome. Of course, Art Nielson and Stan Nielson were great. Those were the first guys that I was around. I saw the Sheik once or twice. It was very regionalized at that time. So I returned to Oklahoma and wrestled in Oklahoma. Again there was tremendous jealousy because I was outdrawing the junior heavyweights. Then I got lucky and met Wild Red Berry in Joplin, Missourri and Red was managing the Kangaroos and some other people for Vince McMahon in New York. And he came home to Joplin because he lived in Kansas. They didn't even have a local television show, that's how dumb the promoter was. Here was a promoter promoting a town where he refused to put a television show on. He wanted to do a live interview on the Saturday night news to promote his matches. So they booked Red and I as a tag team because Red was getting so old that he didn't want to be in singles matches. So these guys came out wanting to make a big name for themselves and they gave Red a hard time on the interview and ol' Red was a self-taught guy and a fabulous guy, a star for years on the West coast, and he had started out in coal mines fighting for fifty cents a fight back in the days when you got a dollar or two to fight. His father had abandoned his mother and he was determined to support her and he did. Red started out in wrestling and had a tremendous spirit. He took the Dale Carnegie course and started memorizing sayings and he would say these sayings and it really caught on on the West Coast. And Red made some money back then, although nothing by today's standards, but the dollar was worth so much more. But he started investing it and Red was well invested in the stock market in blue chip stocks, AT&T, Kansas City Power & Lights - so to make a long story short, when these guys interfered with him on the interview, I ran out there. Red got so excited - it was funny because they called me "Big" Bill Watts back then and Red had said I looked like a guy named Dick Hutton and Dick Hutton was a national champion at Oklahoma State University and an NWA World Champion for a while. Well, when I went out there to stop the guys who were harassing Red, he got so excited, he said, "That's right, ladies and gentleman, me and my partner 'Big' Dick Watts will be there tonight." And it just cracked me up. Of course, naturally, anything you say, fans are so attentive so when I came in that night - I always used to jump the top rope - and as I started to jump the top rope, there were these two old ladies sitting at ringside, they said, "Well, hello there, 'Big Dick.'" And, hell, I tripped, caught my toe on the top rope, and fell flat on my face. God, I was embarassed.

"NATURE BOY" BUDDY ROGERS

KELLER: I bet Red was impressed with that great start.

WATTS: Well, he was impressed with my athletic ability and my intelligence and all. Well, I didn't realize - and I was wrestling in Wichita Falls, Texas the next week on the Thursday night in a 4-H Barn Arena with no telephone in it. And the police came and told me there was an emergency call for me. And I thought, oh my gosh, there was something wrong with my parents or something. And it was Vince McMahon from Washington D.C. Red had told them about me and he said I was going to be a big star and they wanted me to come to New York and wrestle in Madison Square Garden. I was still so naive because I told them, "You'll have to call Mr. McGurk and ask him because I wrestle for Mr. McGurk." They said, "Do you realize how much more money you're going to make? And I said, "I don't care. I wrestle for Mr. McGurk now." So anyway, they called Leroy. Leroy, again because I was a heavyweight and I was outdrawing his junior heavyweights, he I think was kind of happy to get rid of me. The people wanted the action from the big guys. So I went to New York, and that's how I got my start in New York. And everybody from Oklahoma was a Cowboy, so I went to the Stetson Hat Factory in Philadelphia and bought a cowboy hat, and hell, all I wore to school was blue jeans and cowboy boots and everything, so I had that. Then I went to all these dude ranches for all these magazine stories. At that time, Red was guiding me. As a matter of a fact, I even moved in with Red when his wife Lilith went to Pittsburgh to help run the census, because they put me on television every night of the week and I wasn't making any money. I was starving. I was going to go home. He said, "You dummy, they love ya'." And I said, "Yeah, but I'm not making any money." So he moved me in with him and of course I did catch on and make a lot of money and like most young kids I was blowing it all. Red took me and made me start buying mutual funds and guided me and it was the right kind of influence.

KELLER: Who were some of the other good influences you met while working for McMahon?

WATTS: The highest quality athlete, without a doubt, was Bruno Sammartino. Bruno was probably to me a guy with more integrity than anyone I've met. He's definitely head and shoulders above the average guy. He just has an aura and a way about him. He wouldn't guide you wrong. As a matter of fact, I used to get mad at the promoters because I was getting cheated so bad on the payoffs. And he said, "How much were you making in Oklahoma? Were you getting paid fair?" I said, "Yeah, I was getting paid fair there, compared to this." Then he asked, "But how much are you making here? Is it more than you were making there?" And I said, "Four times as much already." "So," Bruno said, "Would you rather get cheated and save money so sometime you don't need him or would you rather go back there and barely make it on fair payoffs. He made me see some light. We started working out together. He was a legend before he got into pro wrestling. Bruno Sammartino was the strongest man in the world; he was doing 585 on the bench press in 1961, but they would never publicize because back then when you were a pro in one sport, you were a pro in all. I finally did 585 in 1968 and it was still the most of those we knew of in the world. So he and I had a rapport together.

A guy like Gene Kiniski would chew your

> "And there were some horrible promoters, promoters than should have been shot, they were such thieves..."

ass out. He'd chew your ass out about doing the wrong things. There was just a tremendous tradition. There were a lot of stars that weren't respected at all. For instance Dr. Jerry Graham. He was a brilliant guy, but at that time he had lost control of his life to alcohol and he just wasn't respected anymore. I just missed getting to see Buddy Rogers compete. But I did meet Buddy back there and he had a certain following and he was a very intelligent guy. The wrestlers that knew him were a little leery of Buddy because Buddy always seemed to manipulate things to his own best ends. And he wasn't like a Sammartino, who drew people to him because of his leadership.

Killer Kowalski was another first class big star. He was a vegetarian. He was a first class guy. Bobo Brazil was a first class wrestler. I mean, these guys, they were like your leaders without even trying to be. They would set a tone. There was a real tradition. Let me tell you, you made the town no matter what. I mean, no matter what you made the town.

KELLER: Even if there was a softball game that conflicted with it?

WATTS: Shit yeah. You realize that these fans were the lifeblood of your business and you made the big towns and you made the little towns. If there was a little crowd, you still gave it your all. You realized that a small crowd represented your base, your core group, and without them you didn't have anything. And you were paid based on the gates. You didn't have any big guaranteed contracts. With the fact that it was regionalized, if you weren't doing well, you had so many other places to go. And there was so much talent churning because people were always trying to get in. And there were some horrible promoters. Some promoters that ought to have been shot, they were such thieves. But still, you learned, and there were so many ways of developing. And they gave the fans a tremendous amount more than most give them today. There was a wider range. I don't blame that on the athletes today.

GORILLA MONSOON

KELLER: What do you think of the quality of wrestlers today?

WATTS: They are so much bigger and they can do so such more, and more nonstop. But also, there are not a lot of places to develop left anymore. All they're doing is seeing what the guys that are already on top are doing and they have cut down the range of what they do, although they do much more spectacular things while they're doing them. They're just so much greater an athlete. I mean, I was a superman of my era, and now they're all supermen with the weight training and unfortunately steroid abuse. But, when you meet guys like Gorilla Monsoon, he was a phenomenal athlete. I mean, here was a guy who could jump all four ropes in Madison Square Garden at his bodyweight. He was just unbelievable. Waldo Von Erich was probably one of the greatest television interviews. He got kicked off of television because of the intensity of his remarks on the East Coast. So all he could do was stand next to Red Berry and Red would interview for him and he'd whisper in Red's ear and give that funny snarl and laugh and it would still drive people crazy. Of course, Ray Morgan was one of the commentators and his ego was so great I would also call him "Morgan" after I became a villain up there and he would get so pissed at me, and here I was someone who was supposed to be in the business acting like a mark. And he was so pissed, he was complaining to Vince and everybody about how I would treat him on TV. He didn't realize that he was helping to build my image because he hated me so bad, too. He hated me for real because I was putting him down. I had him to the point where he could hardly conduct an interview with me. And it was just amazing. And then the old Garden, I wrestled Sammartino which after I was there after being Sammartino's partner, I realized that even with all the money I was making, the way to make the big money was to wrestle Sammartino. He was the headliner. Bruno was the biggest box office thing to ever hit. So I went against Bruno, and for our first match, it sold out that afternoon and it had the largest crowd that was ever in the old Garden in its history and that came out in the paper several times. What actually happened was the fire marshall wasn't there that night so the promoters crammed more people in there. But it was a record that stood.

KELLER: What year was that?

WATTS: It was about 1965. Gosh, the ringside was probably $5 then. Prices were unbelievable. Then I wrestled Bobo Brazil in Washington D.C. My remarks were so racial in their overtones that it sold out Washington D.C.. It took 40 policemen to escort me to the ring. And a guy named Myron Cope was travelling with the *Saturday Evening Post* to write a story about me and he came to the ring to feel what it was like and he said, "Bill, please have these guards get me out of here. You're going to get yourself killed." And, of course, there was a riot and I ended up having to break through a fire door and have my clothes brought to me. It was a pretty wild time. I wrestled Bruno Sammartino at Forbes Field one time and they turned over my cab. Gene Kiniski was another quality guy. They guided the young stars. So New York was an amazing time and I got tons of publicity.

KELLER: Where did you go after your sti in New York?

WATTS: I went to Canada for a shc period of time. I had a pretty bad beef in S. Diego and they didn't know whether the guy w going to survive or not. So I went over Canada for a while and that was when th changed my name to "Big" Bill Watt. They sa it was because "Whipper" Billy Watson and n name were too close. That is how ridiculous th were. Antone Ripiliony used to always tease m "I knew you when you lost your 's'." And R Steeon was notoriously a thief on the payof He would keep the gate receipts and if he went the track and lost, your payoff would really down. And I was up there when they shot Joh F. Kennedy and it closed the territory down an was starving to death. It was tough getti started. Even Oklahoma you got to realiz Wade, that I used to drive from Tulsa Oklahoma City to Little Rock before they h freeways. It was an all day trip on two lane roa on Tuesday, then Wednesday you'd go over Springfield, Missouri and make a live intervie at noon for dialing for dollars, then on Thursd sometimes I'd go clear to Amarillo, Texas. A then come back Friday to Oklahoma Cit Unbelievable trips, but that was just a traditi and you just did it. It wasn't jet travel. It was even airplane travel. You didn't make enou money and everything was regionalized.

Then I moved on to the West Coast a wrestled for Roy Shires and he w tremendously intense. I mean, he really was intelligent promoter. The only problem was put his personal touch, his personality everything, and finally he just ran dry. But was unbelievably intelligent. He was very ha to get to know. For some reason, he and I had great mutual respect. I still think a whole lot Roy Shires. I learned a tremendous amount fro him. Of course, he had probably the great performer in the business at the time, R. Stevens. And Pat Patterson was his partner at t time. And they were the greatest tag team I h seen at the time. Ray Stevens was head a shoulders above others athletically with what could do. He was just a fabulous natural athl and a tough, tough guy. And Pepper Gomez, career was waning. I was Shires's champion, b they tag teamed me with a Jim Heaty. Jim Hea was a phenomenal athlete. Some of the match we were in against Pat and Ray were just literal beyond anything I'd ever seen at the time. Wh Jim Heaty went to Hawaii, that is when J Scarpa, who was Chief Jay Strongbow, becar my partner. Joe Scarpa was a really fabulous g to be around. He was thrifty. He saved money. He was pretty down to Earth. He had ton of knowledge. He just never got to be a b star. The funny thing is, Vince McMahon wou never use him in New York because he sai "Aw, you're just a local guy from Jersey." He they changed his name to Chief Jay Strongb when in reality he's an Italian from New Jers and he's made a lot of money. But I real always liked Joe. I always thought he was a cl guy. That's where I met Thunderbolt Patters Some of the names are hard to remember. Th

Torch Talk Collection: THE EVOLUTION OF PRO WRESTLING

Fritz Von Erich came out there and wrestled. And Fritz was already very intense in the things he would do. Of course, Lou Thesz. He was someone I met in my very first year in the business and Lou Thesz and I had a great rapport. Lou was a great athlete. He carried himself with a lot of class. When he would come to the arena he would dress tremendously well with alligator shoes and a nice suit; I mean, he really was the champion.

KELLER: Where was your next stop after Roy Shire's promotion?

WATTS: Well, I went back to Oklahoma briefly. Then I went up to work for Verne Gagne in Minneapolis. Verne was a very, very smart guy. I learned from all of these people. Really, the sharpest guy for Verne was The Crusher. He just understood people. He understood everything. He really, really was the box office attraction. But there was such fabulous talent. There was Dick Beyer, who was The Destroyer world wide, but Verne made him Dr. X. Great athlete. Fabulous athlete. And Harley Race and Larry Hennig were a tag team. I mean, what a tag team. What a tag team. With Harley Race's type style and big old Larry Hennig. It was just unbelievable. And then Dr. Bill Miller, who spent more time in his medical practice as a veterinarian. Karl Gotch, when I first got into the business, was an unbelievable athlete and a fabulous wrestler. Travelling around the country allowed you to meet all of these people. But under Verne up there it was tremendously exciting. I learned a tremendous amount again. That's where I met Bobby Heenan who was wrestling and working as a manager for Dick the Bruiser when I would go down to Indianapolis.

KELLER: When did you finally get into promoting?

WATTS: Well, after I left Verne, I bought into the promotion with Leroy. And then I started the transformation of this area. As a matter of fact, my first partners were Verne and Fritz. They were kind of silent partners in the operation. I stayed in Oklahoma for three years. It was really hard to work with LeRoy because alcohol was starting to affect him. He was miserable about his blindness and everything, which was totally opposite of Ed "Strangler" Lewis, who was blind also. Leroy had so much more, and he was tremendously intelligent and made so much money and was so fortunate. But he had a bitterness in him that was just consuming him. It was constant. He would stay up all night to find things to drive you nuts on. He would fight everything you'd do. In other ways, he and I were close. He would fly in my airplane. By then I was flying myself everywhere. That was the only way I could cover my area, because it was such a big area. And Leroy would hop in the plane and fly with me. We'd fly to the Bahama's and go swimming. I'd taken him to bowl games, to the Cotton Bowl, and the Sugar Bowl. He was so endearing, but he would constantly destroy that feeling with things he used to do. So in 1979 he and I split ways and we divided our area.

Let me back up a bit. When I left him in 1973, Eddie Graham brought me into the situation in Georgia where Ann Gunkel, well Ray Gunkel had started to doublecross his partners, Paul Jones and Buddy Fuller. But Buddy Fuller and Lester Welch exchanged stock, so Buddy Fuller went to Florida and Lester had gone to Atlanta. So the Gunkels had decided to take it all. They had the classic battle going on, what they called a wrestling war. So Eddie Graham brought me in there and Eddie recognized my talent promotional ability. Eddie recognized, as he called it, a "budding genius." Eddie was the smartest man I met in wrestling. He had his own devils to fight, but he was without a doubt the most intense person and teacher. He was the one that really gave me direction and focused me and believed in me. So he had me start running the operation. It was Lester Welch's company and the old Paul Jones's, but he had me actually running the talent in Atlanta. We just had unbelievable business and so for a year I was in that and that's how I got my stock in Georgia Championship Wrestling. Then we brought in Jim Barnette who had the bankroll and could do things politically and could finish off the Gunkel situation. And that was the first anti-trust suit that was big in wrestling. We didn't realize we were being set up. It was all bullshit, completely bullshit. There was never anybody threatened. It was just ridiculous. But that was what they were really working for. But there was a settlement and Barnette negotiated himself out of the settlement. It was one of those crazy things. But then I went down to Florida in 1974 and booked Florida. And that was the year that it had the biggest net - net to the stock holders - in the history of the company. Of course, Dusty Rhodes was a rising star then and we had unbelievable talent. It was an exciting time working with Eddie and really getting focused. So when I spent the year there, about the time Buddy Colt crashed his airplane and Bobby Shane died and Gary Hart was injured and Austin Idol was injured, I decided to go back to Oklahoma and revamp Oklahoma and take what was mine. So I went back and we bought Fritz and Verne out and, like I said, Leroy and I couldn't get along anymore and I did my own thing and it just exploded. We pioneered the Superdome. And so actually our area was without a doubt the premiere promotion as far as dollars per capita. And also, bottom line, based on gross sales. It was a fabulous period of time. And then, when Vince decided to break all tradition, which was smart for Vince because he was sitting in the media capital of the world, I had already had the same idea and tried to approached the president of Kinney National Services and they almost went for it. So what Vince did made sense. And we were still holding our own; every time he came into our area we would just kill him at the gate. But the oil crunch hit me, something you would never foresee. We had to really fight it near the end of 1986, but we held our own because we had such fabulous momentum. But, you know, shows were just dying. I mean we were averaging $60,000 a show in Oklahoma City and $40,000 in Tulsa. And it fell to $14,000 in Oklahoma City and about $25,000 in Tulsa. Actually Tulsa held up better than Oklahoma City which was opposite of the population. And even in New Orleans, the last Superdome we ran with Crockett, which was the biggest Dome we had ever put together should have been an all-time record. And Crockett and Dusty and those guys thought we didn't do our part in the promotion. They didn't realize just how strong the economy was. The proof of the pudding - it kind of gave me perverse joy - after I sold out to Crockett, he didn't draw shit in the area. My last big show in Tulsa did $119,000 and Crockett never even broke 20 grand in Tulsa. So he never drew a dime in the Superdome or in New Orleans, so with all his pomposity or pompous bullshit, he was never able to do anything with his troops.

But, the losses were so great, so what we did to survive was to start to build a television network. Our shows were so highly rated in a competitive situation with anybody, we beat anybody with ratings. At that time, we made a deal with Ted Turner to take over Ted Turner's stuff. But Vince was going to sue, and Ted was kicking Vince off. So we made a deal to do Ted and Ted never gave us a locked-in time and for a very short period of time and outdrew anything he had. But then Crockett paid Vince McMahon a million dollars to take his contract off and got Turner's show. So Crockett fed the very monster that was eating him up. So Turner broke his word to me, so, you know, I was on the outs. But we were still doing good. So I figured it was just an education I got that Ted Turner's such a big mongol that my word to him had to be good but I guess he didn't figure he had the same bounds. I found in life that if a guy thought he was more powerful than you, he expected your word to be good, but he could change his mind. I better say that Ted "changed his mind." All we had was a handshake, but back then that was enough for Ted up until then. But it was a wild and woolly time. And I saw they could buy my wrestlers out from under me and I was one of the few guys who really build and developed stars. And most of the stars at some point in their life had a portion of their career under me and it was a formative, creative time and most of them will admit that because I demanded an awful lot of them. I demanded excellence and I demanded the discipline. We had fun and we worked hard, but they had certain things I just would not put up with. Although they rebelled at times, they all appreciated it later. I was one of the first people to have a fine system in my promotion which I felt they were professional athletes, and they had to act like professionals and if they violated what was good sense, then I fined them.

And I guess one of the greatest stars I ever had was Ernie Ladd. And of course, Dick Murdoch. Dick Murdoch at the time had that old tradition and would bust his ass. What a great athlete. And Jack Brisco was a big star through the Florida thing. And Jack, we always had an unbelievable closeness. You could always count on Jack and Jerald. Buddy Colt was the kind of guy who would go no matter what until his plane wreck. So I was fortunate to deal with all of those stars. Paul Orndorff, who had such a tremendous ego, and he and I would argue constantly, but I'll tell ya', in the ring, Paul gave you one-hundred percent. Paul was such a great, great athlete. And I had some tremendous battles. When I turned Orndorff villain, he couldn't stand it and he was going to quit, but when he got in the ring he loved it. And I split up Bruiser Brody and Stan Hansen. Heck, I had almost started them and as a tag team they only went so far and they were killing each other. They almost quit over it. But they did it and Stan Hansen became a star quicker. He uust took off when they were split-up. And then Brody came. And the bad thing about Brody unfortunately was his attitude got to where his word was no good. It was just the starting point. I always liked him and always respected him, but I just wouldn't use him anymore. He would ask me, "Why won't ya' use me?" And I'd say, "Because your word's no good." In our business at that time, your word was your bond, that was the old tradition. So when Brody came and if the gate was bigger, he either wanted more money before he went on or he wouldn't go on, and hell, I wouldn't take that from anybody.

So anyway, Vince started his situation going. And Ole Anderson, of course, was working his bit. Ole was a great star in Georgia and a great booker. I sold him my ten percent of Georgia Championship Wrestling to get started. He got into it with Barnette and forced Barnette out. But then Ole was under so much pressure and we didn't understand the megatrend that was happening because it had been a traditional business. Vince by then had just too much moxy. Vince is a tremendously intelligent man and he and his dad had planned this. His dad died, but in my opinion, they had planned this; it is my opinion. They had a million dollar slush fund and in those days, that was an unbelievable amount of money to start something. And still, I know Vince told me himself that he almost went down the tubes, that he was sweating it out and then it hit and went big time. Vince was a genius and he was ahead of his time. But he also, as far as I am concerned, has destroyed wrestling. Because it's the same pattern as when boxing started out at Madison Square Garden. Boxing was alive and well in this country. There was boxing all over. There were tons of places for young boxers to come up. You made many more matches. You had champions that really fought. They were in the ring all the time. Well, when they started it out of Madison Square Garden on a Friday night big time by the method of television nation-wide; it killed all those fight clubs. It just killed it. Look at boxing today. You have guys that are over the hill, that shouldn't even be in the ring, drawing the big gates. They are horseshit fights, too. If you become a big star, there are only two people to box for. So, I mean, they have it so locked up that they have total control. If you don't box for them, you're finished. Well, that's what's happened in wrestling now. See, when I was in it, they had twenty, twenty-five offices. And if you, as a wrestler, didn't like the promoter, you could tell him to stick it up his ass and go somewhere else. So you were truly an independent contractor and you had the pride of doing business with how you could live with it. Now, in today's market, there's only two places where you can wrestle and make a living. So Vince totally controls his. To me, Vince is a genius. But it also shows what his true feelings about wrestling and wrestlers are. I mean, there's a deep love-hate there. He wanted always to become a wrestler himself. He's turned everyone that wrestles for him into a macabre cartoon.

KELLER: Speaking of promoters being wrestlers, how hard was it for you to hang up the tights and become a promoter full-time?

WATTS: I was one of the first active young promoters to say, "Hell, I'm not gonna' feature Bill Watts." I came out of retirement and did tour a few times that my bookers talked me into. That was generally when we had a lack of direction or we had something at the blowoff stage that we could capitalize on having an old man who had a great reputation with the fans coming out and putting some young stud like Junkyard Dog with me and we'd do phenomenal business. But I'll tell you one thing the fans understood: we were simple. If we said you're going to get something in that arena, you got it. If we said it was going to be a war, you got a war. If we said you were going to see somebody's ass get kicked, you saw somebody's ass get kicked. It may not be the ass you thought was going to get kicked. In other words, we believed there was a point in this business that if you break your trust with your fans - now, I don't mean we sit there and say we can make everything the fans want to happen, happen - but I am saying the fans have to know - especially with the high ticket prices of today - that if they go to that fuckin' arena, they're going to get their money's worth. I mean, from start to finish and that we don't cheat them, or lie to them and tell them "so and so's" not there when we knew three months ago he wasn't going to be there, which is so typical of even Vince. And we don't change a title and still have him wearing the title on the road.

KELLER: But that's the wrestling press's fault for revealing the title already changed hands, right?

WATTS: That's just ridiculous. That just reflects what their consideration of the fan is, a "subhuman." It reminds me, there was supposed to be an old promoter years ago, he would ask his fans, "How many of you want to see Antonia Rocca?" They'd boo the shit out of him - and I'm just using a name. And the promoter would say, "Well, you're going to see him anyway, ya' hear." And that's the mentality you're talking about.

KELLER: It reminds me of the story illustrating the opposite mentality when Giant Baba wasn't going to bring Rip Roger back on tour because he didn't like his act, but a couple fans said they liked him, so Baba said he would bring Rogers back.

WATTS: The Jap mind is hard to fathom, even in wrestling. And back then they had television executives running their promotion because it was the TV companies that owned them. But there was never any rhyme or reason to what they did.

KELLER: What do you think of Japan wrestling today?

WATTS: I tell ya', I haven't really kept up on it.

"I have a complete
concept for wrestling i
this country that is s
totally awesome, it'
unreal, but I just don'
want to get into it. All i
would take is a coupl
of million dollars to ge
it going, but then i
would be the bigges
thing going. Whe
wrestling has gone s
far in one direction, yo
need to go in the totall
opposite direction. Th
country is so hungry fo
it, it'd be unreal."

KELLER: What about the Global Wrestling Federation?

WATTS: What is that?

KELLERS: Joe Pedicino's new promotion

WATTS: Oh, Joe, I haven't watched
They called me and wanted me to get involv
but they didn't want to pay.

KELLER: If you got a piece of the acti
like you mentioned with TBS, would you g
involved?

WATTS: I'm not going to get involved in
new group. I'm not interested. I'm busy now a
I'm happy, I'm freshly married and I'm enjoyi
life, and I don't have to put up with all the eg
and the crybabies and renegotiating every deal.
don't have to do that right now. So in order f
me to do something like that, it would have to
something special. Joe and I just did so
preliminary talks over the phone and we we
going to talk again, but he apparently decided
his mind that I'd be too expensive for him. We
let me tell ya', you get what you pay for.
knows his deal, he knows his backers, so
knows whether he can survive or not survi
That's up to him. I haven't watched it and ha
no idea where he is going or what all
arrangements are. So he and I never got p
preliminaries. He wanted me just
commentate. I told him I wasn't interested in j
commentating, first of all. And second of
you need a hell of a lot more than that. Then
told me who his brains were. I told him th
were great brains, but they're young and th
need a little guidance. That's what you need
for, a little guidance. I can fly to Dallas eve
other weekend and do commentary, but I'm
interested. The only reason I ever commenta
on my own shows was I knew what was bei
built, therefore I could make the peo

understand and as an athlete and a wrestler, I could also make them understand what was happening in the ring. I could make them understand what a hold did, what hurt. I could make them understand that because I had been there. I never thought I was a great commentator, gee wiz. But I knew what the guy in the ring was doing. And that's why they get color commentators today in football and everything else, because they're trying to share vicariously the experience of whatever is happening out there. The last years I didn't even commentate when I had Jim and we did different things with different people.

KELLER: When you look back at the UWF, do you have any regrets that perhaps you should not have sold the promotion?

WATTS: Oh, I don't think at that time I had a choice. I mean, the oil states, which was still my base revenue while I was building, the economy just totally dropped out. It was devastating. I was just in the process of getting my network up and going and the syndicator I had really didn't know what they were doing. We were all growing. We were trying to get up to the level of what Vince already understood. We had a syndicator and he was trying and his investors got caught in the same thing. He had real serious backers. They owned hotels in Texas and everything. And they lost those, so he was scrambling. And he had an unscrupulous guy that was handling our account that would just tell TV stations anything and wouldn't tell us. So he had made deals with television stations promising to pay huge amounts of money and we didn't even know about it. I kept trying to get the guy fired and off of our account, but he was kind of like Crockett is to Dusty, he felt he had to have the guy even though the guy was doing wrong. Just like Crockett couldn't reel in Dusty's ego, even though Dusty was doing wrong, because he couldn't take over that position himself. Jim Ross has pioneered us into syndication and did a fabulous job. So we were just caught, holding our own until the economy dropped out. We were doing well and we had a game plan and it was working. The show was getting ratings wherever it was. When we would compete head on in events, we would beat Vince handily. So, any way, those type things started happening. So it was either sell it or drain my cash. Vince even wanted me to go with him, but he wanted me to sell and close my area first, and then come with him. That would put him in the driver's seat. Well, he already was there anyway. So, I decided to sell or close down. I was against a megatrend that couldn't have succeeded at that rate without a Turner or somebody without that backing. We needed the education and the new concept. We were starting to get revenue from TV stations. TV stations were needing us. And it was a cheap product for a television station. We were making money off of advertising, but Vince was already ahead with a rate card. Then he was back in New York in the media center where there were people who would push the commercial time in sales and for sponsorship. He was right in the perfect capital for that. We were in the so-called wasteland. Dallas was trying to become a media center, but, at the same time, Dallas got devastated by the economy. We got caught up in the whole maelstrom of what was happening. And neither Crockett nor Vince has drawn anything major in these areas since then, so it proves that even with Vince's machine and how big it was, this was a scorched earth area for him too. So it wasn't our promotion that went down here, it wasn't Crockett's promotion that went down here, it wasn't Vince's promotion that went down here. It was beyond any of our control.

> "(Turner) should wake up to the fact that (WCW) is totally mismanaged and that Petrick and Herd are the pivotal point because Petrik hired Herd and continued to stay with him when he knows he's incompetent. So Petrik is incompetent, but he is having to prove that he is right, so he has to make it the fault of wrestling and not the fault of Jack Petrik."

KELLER: If a couple of more things had gone right and say WCW didn't survive, do you see your UWF becoming a major promoting force?

WATTS: If we got the deal we originally got with Turner before Crockett paid Vince a million dollars in order to get the Turner show away from us, and we got with the Turner group - and at that time Turner was still in a hands-on position with that company - then without a doubt we would have done it because I knew what to do. We'd of had the Turner power and the Turner capital behind us and we would have done it, and so would have Ted. Ted wouldn't have lost all the money he's lost and he would have had better programming. Who knows what he's lost now, eight, ten million dollars, maybe more now. He wouldn't have had those losses. It would have been the right time, we would have been geared, our economy was still doing good, our dates were still doing good. But Turner would have given us the positioning to implement what we needed and be the true competition to Vince. I tell ya' Vince needs the competition, too, or else everything just dies out. And for the wrestlers, when Turner goes down the tubes, which eventually he will, he'll just write it off because he's not going to look into it and see it's being so badly, badly, horribly mismanaged by his executives, by the people he's got in charge of it because they're going to cover themselves, saying it is the fault of wrestling, not their fault. Turner won't look into it, so he will just drop it or make it strictly a television promotion, which it damn near is anyway for all practical purposes. But what that does is it doesn't give a wrestlers anywhere else to work but for Vince. So Vince is calling the shots. It's like boxing, either you do it my way and exactly how I want it no matter how stupid it seems and like it or you can go home and be a security guard. That's what's happening and Vince is sitting up there in the power seat. And I don't blame him. When you're number one, be number one. He's so far ahead now, he's even been quoted as saying the Turner group is kind of like an old fly buzzing around his head. You know it's out there, but it's not a threat to ya'. I mean, his arrogance in that is well deserved.

JIM HERD, WCW EXEC. V. PRES.

There has been nothing used from Ted Turner's end like it could be to make it a truly competitive event and even sometimes with Turner in the lead. Jack Petrick is the head of that division, and he hasn't got a clue. When he said to me, "Well, Turner doesn't mind losing money to get a division started," I thought, "Gee wiz, what's happened here." A guy like Ted Turner knows it takes money to get something started, but a guy like Turner who built that thing damn sure doesn't want to throw money away to get things started, he wants to invest money to get something started. So if he understands the situation, he sure should mind what is happening there. To blow that kind of money on wrestling to get something started... they're not getting anything started, it's getting worse and worse and worse. He should wake up to the fact that it is being mismanaged. And he should wake up to the fact that it's totally mismanaged and that Petrick and Herd are the pivotal point because Petrik hired Herd and continued to stay with him when he knows he's incompetent. So Petrik is incompetent, but he is having to prove that he is right, so he has to make it the fault of wrestling and not the fault of Jack Petrik.

KELLER: Had you stayed on the SuperStation, do you think you could have become number one?

WATTS: Oh, definitely. We would have had the prestige. Now, I don't want to get into what really is causing their problem, because it's so simple, why should I give them the answers. The SuperStation is a positioning tool and a blessing, and an anchor around their neck in many ways. But with Turner, when Turner - as smart and sharp as he is - in a hands-on situation when you go to him and talk to him, then he is so smart and so sharp, he is going to do what makes sense. I offend him because I tell him the truth, and he's not used to that. He's used to everybody coming in there and licking his boots. So he had gotten intoxicated with that and he has become immune to people coming in and telling the truth because people are in awe of him. To me, he is just another human being, he's just tremendously smart and he's been at the right place at the right time and taken advantage of it. But that doesn't mean I should go in there and grovel and say, "Yes, Ted. Yes, Ted. Yes, Ted." When it's "No, Ted. No, Ted. No, Ted." But when he was open to that kind of dialogue, why, you could have gone in there and said, "Ted, we either have to do this or this," because he's the boss of the station and you're in his promotional situation. But say, "Ted, what do you really want. Because this is what this is causing us. So we either have to do this or this to be truly successful in this promoting area." It can't be everything to you or you end up diluting you're entire product. But, he's smart enough where if you make sense to him and you talk to him like that, he will see what you say is sensible. But he's gotten to the point from what I can gather where he's highly insulated and everything else is doing fabulous - I mean, look at what the Persian Gulf situation has done for CNN and things liked that. This is not as important, although ... Well, two things. I truly believe they are playing with the books as far as how the wrestling division is covered, not so much in the live gates, but certainly the importance it has to them for original programming. With Turner, he's a smart businessman and he's not going to shoot himself in the foot with one hand and try to go ahead with the other.

I found him to be very open. Everybody knows he's a man of vision. But he's turned it over to other people who are running it like a corporate bureaucracy and there's no cooperation among bureaucracy there. Only Ted can cross that line because every one of these guys has their own ego in their own division and won't cross any lines unless they get all the bows. So that leaves Turner who could walk in and say, "Hey, we're gonna come together at Turner Broadcasting and make this work." There are so many things they could do to make this the biggest thing in the world. Hell, the money and power and prestige and all the things you can do is awesome. Instead, they've let it trickle down to a little cheap imitation of a Vince McMahon road show.

KELLER: Looking at Vince McMahon and they way he presents his wrestling, do you believe he could be more successful if he also presented a new dimension to his wrestling - that being stressing quality matches?

WATTS: Oh, absolutely, without a doubt. Vince is so smart and so far ahead of his time, too. Vince is a visionary. And I mean, he's seen this. He's way ahead of his time, a brilliant man. I've often thought, I have another concept of wrestling that is totally different than it is now. I've often thought about calling Vince. He and Ted Turner are the only two that would see it. Vince has got the guts to do it because Vince believes in it. He's got enough confidence that if he believed in it, he would do it. It is so against what everybody would ever accept, but it is truly the way to go. And it doesn't affect what is going on. One of my goals if I went to Turner would be to rebuild his division as is and make it a proven star in his realm. Then I would go to him and say, "Hey, Ted, I've proven I can do this, now will you listen to this other idea I have. This thing can continue on, but I have something else that I think can be even more powerful in the long run and I think it is something you would enjoy more once it is built." Turner has the assets and the capability of gearing-up what I have in mind.

Then with Vince, two or three times I've woken up in the middle of the night and thought I should call Vince and fly out there and discuss it with him, because if Vince agreed with me, he would do it. He's his own man. Hell, he's a proven man. He could do it. He's already gone against the whole industry and succeeded. He has that confidence. We could put our egos aside. When you're working for somebody, you have to realize you're working for them. It's theirs, not yours. And if he got behind the game plan that I had, hell, it would be a whole new situation completely different than the current situation, and it would be a worldwide situation. It would be tremendous fun and have a hell of lot more longevity. I've completely put it together in my mind. You would need someone like Tribune Broadcasting or Turner or Vince or somebody like that to back it. You could go the long route and get a group of backers, but that would be the painful process.

KELLER: Have you talked to Tribune Broadcasting about such a proposal?

WATTS: No, but I have a really good friend that is really into the Tribune. I've thought about it. I'm enjoying what I'm doing and what I'm doing now, when it gets up and running, would have less headaches. Still, there's that creativeness in me and it's a business I've spent my life in and it's a business that I love and it's a business that I respect. Also, I have always been into trends. I didn't realize the full impact, even though I had already talked to Kinney National Services which owned Warner Communications about doing the very same thing Vince is doing back in 75, 76. I saw the vision, too, it's just that I didn't follow through on my vision and Vince did. I was too busy building what I had, and it was providing enough. Vince's dad built what he did, and when Junior came in, he didn't have the same pressures of the buildings, so he wasn't locked into that forest. So he was able to take the assets of his dad and then he also had the desire to be beyond what his father had ever been. And to be the impresario and not be just something that was handed down to him. He was handed down a tremendous base. It's almost like Donald Trump, where Donald Trump's father gave him a tremendous base, financial backing, and a tremendous leg up to get going. The fact that Donald Trump has exceeded that and Donald Trump is the focal point certainly is a reflection of the talents Donald Trump has, but without his dad and his tremendous financial clout, Donald Trump may have never gotten up to bat to hit this homerun that he hit. It's the same with Vince McMahon. Without his fate of being the son of his father, and without his father's tremendous clout, where would he be. His dad kept telling everybody that his son was not anything to bother them. His dad was a master politician or diplomat. His dad was sitting there telling all his lifelong friends not to worry until the end there, but by then it was almost like you had the Trojan horse in your midst. So, I mean, it was a very shrewd deal, but Vince was pulling some strings. That's my picture of it, but I wasn't sitting in their house, I don't know, but that's the way I see it as an overview.

So Vince has that drive and has the vision, just like Donald Trump. He would have done something great probably no matter what. But certainly he had a leg up because they already had the most powerful territory in the country with the biggest population, so therefore the highest gross in gates, so they set aside a million dollar war chest to get started. Still, a million dollars in our business at that time is a tremendous amount of money - that's what I heard, it may not even be true - and they still had huge gates to continue feeding it. And still, he almost didn't make it, he told me himself that his backers were just about at the end and he thought he had not made it, and then it hit for him. So, he still had that point that tested him. He had to go through the fire.

With me, our television show was up and going and our television show was showing it could compete and outdo anyone ratings-wise head to head, because we gave the people more television-wise. But we had the opposite thing, a megatrend hit us. It wrecked Braniff (Airlines) other airlines, it wrecked major companies, it wrecked everything and we were caught right in the center of it. The East Coast was not hurt by the oil crunch. What was good for the economy I was in was bad for the rest of the world, the high price of oil. So the five states I was in - and you have to realize that per capita, we drew more people than any other territory and I made more bottom line dollars than anybody - we ran a more efficient promotion from what I can ascertain than any territory in the country, and even then couldn't overcome the megatrend of the oi dropout.

KELLER: When you look at television and how you produced the TV shows, do you believe there is an answer to the famous catch-22 situation of if you give away too much on TV, no one will go to the arenas, but if you don't give away a lot on TV, no one will watch your show, or know about your arena shows?

WATTS: I've never bought that. That's the old fashioned idea and it's been successful fo guys like Vince and them because they're in such huge population areas that they can do anything to sell out Madison Square Garden once every three weeks, and it's no feather in your hat really. It's great if they can do it. If it was so successful, then why fix it if it ain't broke. Verne Gagne made a fortune doing the same concept My concept was this. I had a small population area where I had to make wrestling part of thei lives. They were tuned to my television, and figured the more that were tuned, that I wa going to get a percentage of them to come to th matches. And a lot of bookers thought the sam thing. Our style of TV challenged their mind more, expanded their vision more, that if yo gave the people more, you just had to give ther more in the arenas. So it was a tremendousl higher maintenance of your creativity, but onc you get into it, it's really exciting to do that muc with it.

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KELLER: Do you think that is possible, looking at WCW or any wrestling company that's running so many TV shows, to make them different enough to keep them exciting? It is one thing to have one TV show in a market, but it's another to have five hours on cable and two or three in syndication.

WATTS: We had two hours and maintained the level in a very small market. I think you have to pick what you're going to make your premier shows. I don't think their problem is totally based on that. I think their problem is based on a lack of coordination in that they do things and they don't read what they're doing and they don't see what their results are before they get off the horse and change. Their thing, so much of TBS's stuff has been to fight the people. They go against the very thing the people are wanting to buy. For example, Ric Flair, for a year they kept trying to make him a villain when the people wanted him to be a hero. Here he's on their television station and he walks out and everybody's cheering and they tried to sell him just the opposite way. I mean, hell's bells, the people are the ones who buy your tickets. You need to sit somebody out in the audience to see what the people are buying. Dusty ,when he was with Crockett, was no longer the American Dream. He still had the charisma talent, the tremendous mind, but nobody wanted to see a big fat great white whale out there as the main eventer. He said, "By gosh, you're going to get me. I'm the main event no matter what," instead of taking all the fabulous talent that would go through hell and high water for him. He was their leadership, but he was focusing all of their leadership on himself. It was a selfish self-centered intoxication of himself that bankrupted Jim Crockett Jr.

DUSTY RHODES AND JIM ROSS

Jim Crockett Jr. didn't have the guts, the mental ability, or the management skills to see it. So he just stuck his nose up Dusty's ass so far that he wouldn't see anything else. Dusty wouldn't let anybody talk to him and they just tip-toed through the tulips right on down to bankruptcy. The biggest reason is Jim Crockett didn't have the ability to do it on his own, so therefore he had to go with what got him to the dance. He didn't have the guts or the courage to make a change. He just rode it right straight to hell. That's the same thing Turner's group is doing. Ted Turner is just riding Jack Petrick's decisions right down the tubes. Really, it's not Herd's fault. The buck stops at the top, not at the bottom. In Turner's group, they try to shove the buck stop to the bottom. But it's Jack Petrick who's calling the shots on the wrestling. And Jack Petrick is the guy who - well, he certainly didn't want to pay me even incentive based of what I wanted because I would be making more money than him. His ego immediately said Turner doesn't pay anyone that much, you can't be an executive and make money like that. And I said, to him, "I'm not an executive then, I'm talent. Because you guys got a problem and I'm gonna solve it. It's not going to take me six months to do it, it'll take me three months. So you better treat me like a member of Ted's baseball team or basketball team. Don't put me in the corporate hierarchy. I'm not a corporate person. I'm the talent. I'm the guy that's going to make you profitable. What the hell do you care what I'm making if the division that you're the head of turns around and starts making money, but you see Petrik couldn't have that because that would be different and that would also give me the option of making more money. I don't know what's in his little bitty tiny reptile brain. You know, the reptile brain hasn't evolved since prehistoric times. It's the same thing. That's what you're fighting there. You're fighting the reptile brain, a mind that is not open to change. Ted is open to change, but you can't get to the guy, so you're stuck with all these lackeys and they're making so much money they're in a comfort zone, so that if anything goes wrong, the first thing they're going to do is make sure they're not to blame. So right now, it's "Look, Ted, we've tried everybody; wrestling just doesn't work."

And yet, who have they tried? Who have they tried? Everybody they've tried has failed. I didn't fail in my company. Even in the situation of the megatrend, I didn't fail. At least I had the vision to sell for the highest price that any wrestling company had ever sold for. I never did fail. And I made money all the years when I ran Florida, Georgia, and everywhere. So I'm the only guy really out there who should have the credentials to be doing what they want done. But hell, they're gonna make sure that doesn't happen. But that's fine with me. Thinking about it and talking to you is bringing up my own opinions about this and my frustrations with it. But I don't dwell on that because I don't even think about wrestling most of the time because I'm doing something else. I think by talking to you it's opening it back up so that I'm airing it, but sure I'm frustrated because I know I can be the answer and I know that Ted Turner and I could be a fantastic team. I know that Vince McMahon and I could be, too, once he understood I knew he was boss. Let me tell you, as soon as he signs your first check, you know that. Right now, he doesn't need me in his present wrestling organization. He's doing a hell of a job and he's got no competition. So in essence, he's the only player out there. When you're the only player out there, you don't need anybody else, even if he can add something to your company you don't need him. So I'd only be of value to Vince to be part of it, but right now he doesn't need it.

> "Jack (Petrik) kept coming back to me and kept asking, 'Don't you think you can work with Jim Herd.' I said, 'If Herd had the ability to do what he needed to do, you and I wouldn't be having this interview. Herd just hasn't got it. You can keep him. He's your lackey. Just keep him out of my way. He has no place in wrestling."

KELLER: When you look at WCW and they don't hire you, who do you think they should hire to be in that booker position?

WATTS: In WCW, there's nobody else. There is nobody else.

KELLER: Jim Ross? Terry Funk? Eddie Gilbert?

WATTS: Jim Ross can't do it, but why in the hell would Jim Ross want to get in that hotseat when he's got a great job? Jim has already influenced the booking in his entire stay there as much as he possibly can. Jim's a frustrated booker. Jim's a good, smart kid. So Jim's touch is on everything they do already. But Jim is not the guy to do the whole thing and like that, Jim has a tremendous talent, he's a hard worker with tremendous expertise. But it's not the total picture. Especially when he's not going to get the total cooperation.

KELLER: What about Eddie Gilbert?

WATTS: Well, Eddie is a supersmart kid again. But you've got to have somebody sitting up there that knows all aspects of it that can guide him. So Eddie's never going to get that kind of thing. He's a brilliant man. But nobody can do it under the current structure because they're going to keep Herd there. What's Herd going to do? He's going to tell Jack Petrick what a terrible job you're doing everyday to cover his own rear. If you get it going, Herd is going to lose his position because it will be so apparent what a failure he is. The other thing is if you get it going, Jack Petrick is going to look like a failure because it took him five years to figure it out. So there's not anyone who can do it under the current protocol that's over there. And that's one thing I wouldn't accept. I told them there was one person I would report to, Jack Petrik, but I would have total autonomy. But we had already got by that except that Jack kept coming back to me and kept asking, "Don't you think you can work with Jim Herd." I said, "If Herd had the ability to do what he needed to do, you and I wouldn't be having this interview. Herd just hasn't got it. You can keep him. He's your lackey. Just keep him out of my way. He has no place in wrestling." Even though Jack told me I would have total autonomy, maybe that scared Jack, too. He's a corporate creature and corporate creature's can't stand the truth. The light of truth scares them, because that sheds a little light on their chair. They really don't like people like me. People like me they like to crush because if I became the star and turned the place around, Ted Turner might notice me. Which is the only reason I would do it anyway, to say, "Hey, Ted, look here, I told you I could do this. Now let's do some things. I'm a big asset to you." That's the same thing I would like to say to Vince McMahon.

"Let's put the past behind us. I grew up in the past. What did you expect me to think when you did this. You destroyed what I'd known traditionally. Then I also recognized your genius. Let's put the past away and go forward." It's hard to throw the past down.

KELLER: I'd like to get your comments on various wrestlers and promoters and what you think were their best and worst qualities. Verne Gagne?

WATTS: Verne was a great, great athlete. Verne was single-minded in his purpose and believed. I didn't get to see him in his formative years, but by the time I met him, what he was going to do was without a doubt what he was going to do. And he had the most relaxed way of doing it. He let it run itself for a while with Wally Karbo and The Crusher and others putting things together. But when he stepped in, he straightened out whatever he didn't like about it and always took it in his direction and was always successful. And he was the kind of guy you would have a love-hate relationship with because he would attract you with his leadership, but at the same time he would piss you off by his trying to put you down for some of the things, some of your strong points. I think I finally convinced Verne he needed someone with his interests in the towns when he wasn't paying attention to the business because Wally rarely travelled and no one would show up at the houses with any leadership and it would be ridiculous. So, after I left, Verne started trying that with different people.

I have nothing but the greatest respect for Verne, but Verne was from the old school and made a fortune with "don't give them much on television." It was the old formula. The same formula Jim Barnette had, Vince Sr. had; you just keep putting the stars against nobodies and then people will pay to see the stars against each other, and every once in a while you make a big deal and you run on it. And that made him a multi, multi-millionaire. He was clouted. I'll never forget his remark to me when I was pointing out some great Mexican places in Tulsa. He said, "Awe, Mexican food is Mexican food. It's all the same." And I said, "Verne, that's your concept of wrestling, too, and you're losing it." And that pissed him off. I'm tellin' it straight. I've always had a love-hate relationship with Verne. I respect him as an athlete, I respect him as a leader. I respect him as a businessman. I don't like the fact that he wants all of that from you, but he doesn't want to give anything of himself. In other words, Verne expects you to be loyal, true, and have integrity with him, but he doesn't show the same qualities back to you because he's above you. His word can change, whereas your word can't. In other words, he can give you his word and then change it, laugh, and say, "I changed my mind." But if you give him your word, he expects you to live by it. And that was a tremendous flaw in his character with me. And that's me as an underneath guy studying up. Because when you're underneath a guy, you study him. And so, hell's bells, if you talk to somebody underneath me, they're going to point out so many more flaws that I had than Verne ever had or anybody else, so I'm not trying to say this from a holier than thou position because that's what it sounds like. When I critique everybody it'll sound like I thought I was perfect and that's not the case.

> "People like me they like to crush because if I became the star and turned the place around, Ted Turner might notice me. Which is the only reason I would do it anyway, to say, "Hey, Ted, look here, I told you I could do this. Now let's do some things. I'm a big asset to you." That's the same thing I would like to say to Vince McMahon."

KELLER: How about Fritz Von Erich?

WATTS: Fritz again had a tremendous belief in himself. He was a very, very hard sonofabitch to work with and he considered he me a hard guy to work with. But Fritz's thing was by god it had to be his way, and he got all the credit, and he didn't understand your problems. He didn't understand anybody's problems as you can see from the tragedies that have happened to his children, I mean three of them are dead. By gosh, can you imagine how hard that man is, how totally tunnel visioned, and insensitive he is. I mean, if he didn't respond to his children. I mean, three of them are dead. All three of them are dead because of events that could or couldn't have been prevented by him. That's a horrible thing to say. I don't know how you're going to print that because it'll kill him and I really respect Fritz. I really do. Again, it's a love-hate relationship because he had to try to crush you all of the time for the very qualities that you could have brought to him and his business. He had some talented bookers, but they were no more than lackeys to him. He never let them become more than lackeys to him. There was just nothing he could share. He couldn't share himself.

KELLER: How about Don Owens in Portland?

WATTS: I didn't know Don that well. Don was such a character. The boys all liked Don. He was apparently fairly honest. Don ran a small-time territory and he prided himself in it and he did a hell of a job on it. He was always a funny son-of-a-gun. I always enjoyed meeting with Don and seeing him. I only worked for him one time while passing through there and enjoyed that. Don was happy in his own little niche. That was where he wanted to be and that's what he enjoyed. It was like family to him out there. He didn't want any changes and he didn't want to get any bigger. Hell, he did well. Everybody that ever worked for him had nothing but the highest praise. They seemed to go out there and love to stay there. The trips were short, the money was good. So, apparently Don was very, very successful in all aspects that I'm aware of. I didn't work for him much personally, so I didn't get to be around him and see how he thought, like with Verne and Fritz.

KELLER: How about Jerry Jarrett?

WATTS: Jerry is a brilliant guy. He's just got an awful lot of monsters on his own back. Jerry is probably one of the most brilliant guys in wrestling, but he so afraid of everything, he is very, very deceptive. He tries to turn everything so that you've injured him off of some decision you've made with him. He's a complex guy. I really like him in some ways. He has a little man's complex. He has a non-athlete's complex where he was always trying to prove he had courage. I remember hearing a statement that he could beat Jack Brisco because he had been on the streets and could pull Jack's eye out or something. I just died laughing. I mean, Jerry Jarrett, you weigh 160 pounds dripping wet. Who'd ever think you could get a hold of Jack Brisco, two time national champion. Some of those remarks Jerry would make, well... Jerry would have his bodyguards with him and all this ridiculous stuff that was crazy. But mentally, he was far ahead of his time. Jerry Jarrett has a tremendous amount of vision. He's just got a lot of self-destruction and is tremendously insecure.

KELLER: How about Jerry Lawler.

WATTS: Jerry's a hell of a guy. I don't know Jerry that well. I think I spent more time with Jarrett than Lawler. Lawler knows how to market Jerry Lawler. Without a doubt. I haven't been around him enough to see him on a daily basis, but I guarantee ya' he knows how to market Jerry Lawler in Memphis. Jerry Lawler just doesn't get over anywhere else. As far as Memphis, he's still the "King" last time I checked, although I haven't paid all that much attention to Memphis. But he never thought of a big star anywhere but Memphis. It was funny, people in Memphis didn't know who the superstars of wrestling were elsewhere.

KELLER: How about Roy Shires?

WATTS: He was a genius. Without a doubt, he was a genius. He was ahead of his time. He was one of the first people to believe in giving the people their money's worth on television and giving the people more than their money's worth at the house shows. Roy Shires pioneered that; he and Eddie Graham. Roy Shires put his personality on everything you did on interviews and in the ring, that when his mind finally ran dry, it had been milked from every aspect. I mean, he ran his territory single-handedly. He didn't have any advisors. He didn't have anybody doing anything. He did it all. He did every damn bit of it. And only if you've been in that position can you imagine the tremendous drain and the tremendous drive and the tremendous genius it took. He just made a bottom line that was unbelievable. Roy Shires didn't overpay anybody, I'll guarantee ya'. Guys made good money out there, but I want to tell ya',

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Roy Shires didn't overpay anybody.

And I really enjoyed my stay with Roy Shires, but he was a difficult sonofabitch to work with because you didn't know where you stood with him. And I finally realized that he liked and respected me, but I didn't know that most of the time I was around him. It's a weird feeling when you're an athlete and you're trying to give it your all, but I really liked Roy Shires and I think he liked me. But he just finally burned out and times started changing. And you have to realize where all these people came from. They came from such jealous feudal systems in wrestling also that they didn't trust anybody. They were afraid if anybody got any position on them, they would steal their territory. That wasn't necessarily true. But Roy stole the territory he ran, so they always feared that. But they should have realized they had the ability to keep what they had. It just a challenge.

KELLER: Jim Barnette who's now with WCW?

WATTS: That's a long one there. Barnette was one of the big names when I got into wrestling. When I broke into Indianapolis, it was probably the worst run territory I have ever seen. They had taken Indianapolis and Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio and all that area that was so fantastic and totally killed it. And Jim owned all of it but Columbus. For that to happen you have to go back to Jim. Jim knew how to position himself and was a mystery man to an extent with his wealth and he knew how to get into businesspeople. He was one of the first guys who wasn't a wrestler coming out of the ring. He was still a businessman, so business people accepted him. He would go on with his little ways, his little effeminate ways. He was no threat to people and Jim was intense and because he had the traits, he was a master of making people turn on each other to his own advantage. And he constantly did that. He did some big, big things in Australia. He went down there and took it and had the airlines paying the fares. He really did well with it. Jim's biggest - if you're talking about a critique of Jim from a wrestling point of view - he is very fickle. If he got off of somebody, he'd get off of them for no reason and go off on another direction. So as that accelerated at the end, he wouldn't have enough direction to stay with anything and keep it going.

Jim was also a victim of the fact that he always needed somebody calling the shots for him, but then he wanted all the credit for it. Well, that was his due, he owned it. He paid very well, but he would be very disruptive if you were booking. If you wanted to fire somebody for not performing the way they were supposed to, Jim's likely to go bonus them and hire them back just to show he is the boss and to keep your authority on the ground under foot, which makes it very hard to maintain the discipline.

I was a minor stock holder when he came into Georgia Championship Wrestling. Jim came in and Jim's manipulation is what basically finished the Gunkels off, but then also, when Jim was supposed to be negotiating the settlement of his famous anti-trust lawsuit, he didn't protect any of the stockholders, but he protected himself. He sold everybody else down the tube. Georgia Championship Wrestling had to pay it all out even though he was making the money.

KELLER: Jim Crockett Senior and Junior?

WATTS: Senior I didn't know very well. Apparently he was a legend in the business. One of the men I felt the very most for, Eddie Graham, really respected Jim Crockett Senior and really thought he was a man of integrity among promoters and a man of his word and a man of vision. And that was enough for me. I never worked for him, so I don't know. But everybody talked extremely high that he paid well and took care of people.

Jimmy Junior inherited a tremendous machine with tremendous capital with tremendous credibility and did a very, very good job. He, too, got caught up in the megatrend and the worst thing that Jimmy Junior got was he didn't have the ability to book matches and he thought he did. He had no concept of what would draw, started believing he did, then he found out he didn't and then he hired Dusty who was the most talented of them all and still had the finest mind. But then he become a fan of Dusty instead of Dusty's boss. By the time he woke up, if he ever actually did wake up, it was too late. Jimmy Junior, his biggest credit, is that he destroyed an empire. The bottom line is he really ain't worth a shit.

KELLER: Vince McMahon Sr.?

WATTS: Oh, Vince Sr. was smooth. He was smooth. Vince was in the largest area. He lived probably the most lavish lifestyle of any promoter in the business and did it the most relaxed. He was totally calm, cool, and collected the entire time. Again, he wasn't from the ring, he was a businessman, so he never understood the guys in the ring. I'll never forget when I was standing in Washington D.C. one time and Buddy Rogers walked out on him and thought he had him by the balls and then he brought in the young Italian, Bruno Sammartino, and Bruno started sparking it. But Bruno needed somebody to wrestle. So they brought in Gorilla Monsoon and that sparked it. Gorilla and Bruno started selling out the garden, selling out everywhere. Monsoon was a hell of a performer, a big tough kind of an athlete. I remember when he took a hellacious bump in Washington D.C. in the old arena. I mean, this guy was huge to do the things he'd do. And he hurt himself. And Vince was standing there and I was standing by him - but he didn't know it - and Vince said, "Gosh, he gets hurt a lot for a big guy." There was just no respect, no concern, and that made me really... Well, I heard him another time when I was in another room. I heard a guy come in and beg, "I'll do anything you want. I need to make a living. Just take care of me." And Vince said, "Sure, no problem." When the guy left the room, Vince said, "Fuck that asshole, leave him off for a month and see what he does." So I knew there was a coldness about him. Of course, that's a product of power. Unfortunately, most people in power have that. I'm not saying I'm not guilty of that. It goes along with power, you forget how you got there and your compassion level is very selective. It would be over a crippled kid or a widow in the street, but the guys who are working for you and busting their ass for you, you get almost hardened toward them.

I'll say this, often times that's developed, though, because your heart's gone out to certain people and they've screwed you. Then you become a hardcase toward them. So you gotta' realize I was the young kid watching and I learned a lot from everyone of those guys that I worked under. I was always studying even though I didn't realize it. I realized the things they did well and the things they didn't do so well. Of course, Eddie Graham was the epitome of all that.

KELLER How about Vince Junior?

WATTS: Well, I don't know him that well. Here's a guy that I knew as a kid and would just see around. He apparently was a fairly good athlete and he's without a doubt a brilliant mind. I think his wife is a big part of that team. She seems to be very intelligent, very businesswise. I have nothing but respect for Vince Junior.

I think he in essence has killed the wrestling business except for himself, which may have been the necessary thing. Certainly he doesn't care one way or the other since he's making it. But I don't think what he has done is good for the business. Look at boxing. Go back and the same thing was done thirty-five years ago in boxing. There's no small areas for talent to develop and it's killed all that. Television is oversaturated. So whatever it is, it's the stamp that he has set on it, and it's killed all the areas. Well, these other areas were great areas, they're what fed other areas. Vince's area was always so big that whoever they wanted, they could get anyway.

Like his dad would say, "I want Waldo Von Erich, I need him." Hell, that was just a nice way of saying give him to me or I'm gonna take him anyway. So you say, "Okay, well could you send me somebody." And he'd say sure, "But I need about four months of a television build up, so keep him for now." So he was really smooth because you knew he could offer so much more damn money, who wouldn't go to the Garden. But he had a way of doing it where it didn't hurt you. He never yanked anybody out from under ya', and he'd always give you someone. He'd always help ya'. Let me tell ya', Andre the Giant when he was the big star everywhere, Vince would say, "Bill, Andre wants to come there because you always take care of him , let me give a few more dates with him." Well, then, you see, you were under debt to him and it was really an easy way to work. I knew who I could compete with as far as fighting for talent and so that type of attitude was always a building end.

And the best thing was if you ran regional areas and you had a big star in our area, that star could go to another area that was down and spark it. Whereas today, with everything exposed nationally there's no way for a star to spark it because there's no new face. I mean, everything that you've got, you already got out there. So the fans have already seen it all, so how could you have a Waldo Von Erich come in out of New York where the people in my area hadn't seen him and make such a tremendous impact. The big advantage of your regional type promotions is you could always have that way of sparking your business with something new. Hell, today, they're all clones of the same pattern and they're already known nation-wide, so that's the hard thing, to find that new star all the time.

KELLER: Let's move on to Eddie Graham. in Florida?

WATTS: Well, Eddie Graham's my favorite. Eddie Graham fought a lot of devils. He was an alcoholic. Thank god the time I spent with him he was dry, he wasn't on it. He had the most productive mind, bar none. I don't think Eddie even finished Junior High. He used to tease me all the time, "You're a college graduate, so why are you working for me when I didn't even finish high school." And I said, "I came to you to get my PhD. Eddie was a hard, tough guy as far as business. But he had a heart of gold. I mean, he seemed to be stimulated by whoever he was spending his time with. In other words, if you were the type of guy that brought out the best in Eddie, he was the best. If you were the type of guy that brought out the worst in Eddie, then he could be a little bit of an ass hole.

I had been working with Leroy McGurk. Leroy had just mentally beaten me to death because he was such a miserable human being. So Eddie called me down into the Gunkel situation in Atlanta where they had taken all of the wrestlers but one and walked out on Paul Jones, who was the guy who owned the area. What had happened was Buddy Fuller and Paul Jones and Ray Gunkel owned the Atlanta territory, in the old type old· area syndrome, which I know is supposed to be an illegal antitrust type terminology, but they owned the booking office. Fuller decided he wanted to change positions and he wanted to move to Florida because he was good friends with Eddie. So Fuller worked a deal with Lester Welch and Lester took Fuller's interest in Georgia and Fuller took Lester's interest in Florida. Well, when that happened, there was so much hatred of Buddy Fuller and Lester Welch by Ray Gunkel and so many other people that Ray decided to pull away and do his own thing. That is supposedly what he was preparing to do when he had a heart attack and died. It was so in the works, that Tom Renesto and Ann Gunkel went ahead and went with it. All the talent went with them but one guy, Bob Armstrong. Bob stayed with Paul Jones. So Eddie Graham immediately saw the trend, and that they were successful there and they'd be coming against him in Florida, too. So he decided to go to Paul Jones who was an old, long-time friend of his and stop it there. He'd rather fight it in another area than his own area.

Eddie was so tuned and so far ahead of everything mentally. So he called me down there and he didn't realize why, so I went down there just to help out and I wrestled a show there and it was like wrestling in a vacuum because all the wrestlers that flew in were people they didn't know. So anyway I was there and Eddie and I talked. He said, "I want to you come here." So he said, "We're restructuring the company and I want you to buy ten percent." To make a long story short, he gave me ten percent and he gave Jack Brisco some. Not in order to manipulate Brisco. Jack was the young star that was going to become the World Champion and Jack had a tremendous rapport with talent and he was great in the ring. So anyway, I was so unhappy with LeRoy that I left my own area and went down there and started working with Lester and started working with everybody there. So we had quite a lively situation and the only place we weren't beating Ann was in Savannah and we couldn't get into Augusta, she had Augusta locked up. But we were selling out every week in Atlanta and we were beating them in Columbus and beating them in Atlanta and beating them in Macon, so it was really exciting times. And I was on the phone with Eddie every day and really got to know him. I was just amazed at his brain.

What he did was recognize the talent in me and he recognized the creativity trying to come out and he gave it direction and focus. That's what I really understand that Eddie did in my life as far as wrestling. He gave it direction and focus. He taught me how to carry it through. He could take something and go with it longer than anybody. He could add to it and add on it. It was just fabulous. We more or less had the situation won. Then he worked the big coup because Jim Barnette wanted to come home from Australia because again Barnette had gotten so fickle in Australia that he killed Australia. The Barnette things never lasted. So Barnette came in and became the major stock holder and he pulled the political things to sink Ann's ship. We had already pretty well beat her, but Barnette got us in Augusta. I mean, he did some things that just killed Ann. Ann went to a lawsuit mode and shut down her operation. At that time I had done what I wanted to do in there, but they asked me to keep it until they made the transition until Jim hired someone else in there, and it was Jerry Jarrett.

Then I went to Florida to book for Eddie. And it was the hardest I ever worked in my life - 1974 - Florida had the highest gross gates it ever had at that time, and the most important thing is it had the best bottom line that it ever had. And Eddie gave me the responsibility of paying the wrestlers and everything else. Eddie and I would spend a couple days a week with each other and ideas just flowed. Eddie was just bringing everything I had to bear and into direction and focus. And it was just mind boggling. They were literally scalping tickets in Miami Beach every week to get in.

There was a tremendous friendly competition between Dusty and Eddie to see when they were booked on the main event, who would sell out the earliest. We had towns selling out an hour, an hour and a half ahead of time. That's when I made Dusty the "American Dream." When he became the real American Dream, goosepimples went down my arm when I saw Dusty become what I saw him to be. The reason I got Eddie back in the ring was simple. We had two towns. We had a West Palm Beach on Monday and Orlando on Monday. Orlando was the closer trip. Ronald Fuller was living in West Palm, and they weren't even using him. He was selling real estate. So I said, hell, I'm paid on the profits. Eddie was smart, he paid me on the profits. So I wanted West Palm up. Well, I couldn't get it up without hurting Orlando. So I brought Mike Graham in and I started to let Mike map out Orlando and put Mike in charge of it. And I would take the second team and work West Palm. I brought Ronald Fuller out of retirement and starting building West Palm. Well, Eddie would not let Mike fail. Mike had to do the best because he was Eddie's son. So I pulled a program on Eddie, and I got Eddie involved in running Orlando which made sure it sold out every night and I ran West Palm and we got West Palm going crazy. So our Monday was kick-ass and our office was making more money off of West Palm. It became such a fun thing. And Eddie would go that extra mile for everybody. He was more happy at that time than I've ever seen him other than the personal devils that he was always fighting.

But then when Buddy Colt crashed and Bobby Shane died and Gary Hart was injured and Austin Idol was injured, I had worked so hard, all I had seen was the inside of an office and the inside of a chartered airplane. I hadn't seen Disney World, I hadn't seen anything. My family said, "All you do is come home and collapse. It's no fun. We're gong back home to Oklahoma." So I said, "Yeah, you're right, I only own nine-percent of Florida and I'm not building anything for myself and you got Buddy Fuller as a stockholder who was not a contributor at all and was a horrible, horrible person as far as I was concerned and he detracted from everything. There were so many stockholders. There was one stockholder that we brought back to life, great athlete and the most loyal guy Eddi Graham ever saw was Hiro Matsuda. He was fabulous athlete. We got mileage out of Hiro. C course, Doc Curtis was tremendously loyal up Jackson and then these are just quality guy There were a lot of stockholders that Eddie hac he had gotten in the trap of having stockholder that contribute a whole thing. So I saw ther wasn't a whole lot of room to grow there.

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So I said, "Eddie, I'm going home." Bu what I had learned and what had finally bee perfected under Eddie, I in essence told Vern and Fritz that we were buying them out and tha they were history there in Oklahoma and Lero and I split it fifty-fifty and the rest is history. built it to the sky and then Leroy couldn't stand and he wanted to be boss more than anything Hell, I never cared about being boss, I jus wanted money. And so Leroy and I split, and took the lower half and he got the upper hal which he ran into heavy debt and the rest i history. My business was sky-high. So I sai Leroy, I'm coming up. I'll buy ya' out or compet with ya', so I bought him out so he'd have a wa of saving face. I didn't want to hurt the old man but he'd killed it. He owed the TV stations ton of money and they were happy that I made hin pay the TV stations with the money I paid him so I at least had their goodwill. We really had great run.

And again, when I'm critiquing o comparing these guys, you've got to realize I'v got the same devils, the same insecurities, an even more. I'm just a guy saying here's what saw in these people, but certainly I have mor flaws than any of them because each one wa great in their own right. Everyone of them was real shaker in the business and everyone of ther fought and clawed their way to the top. So ever damn one of them to me were unbelievabl people and I'm so happy and so richer in my lif

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for having been around them. You have to stop and think. My life in wrestling was fabulous. I met and was associated with and got to see all sides of it. I got to do the whole thing and golly, I'm just sometimes in awe. I drive down the road sometimes and think, boy I'm a long way from Putnam City High School. Here, all of a sudden I'm driving a Roll Royce and I'm flying a turbo prop plane that I bought used for $750,000. I'm thinking, all of this from wrestling? I came from middle class America. My parent's, their entire life, both of them worked, and hell, when I was in college all I thought was if I could ever get a job from somebody for $25,000 a year I would be successful. That's what they taught me back then.

KELLER: Looking back at the events that you are aware of, what were some of the biggest errors or miscues in promoting history?

WATTS: I really don't know right now. I only dwelt on the miscues when I was a wrestler and I saw people who were so misused. When I was involved in a promotion, I was more interested in doing my own thing. That's a hard one, Wade.

Los Angeles was one of the worst promotions in the world. Here they were in all that population, they had the arena locked-up, and their business sucked. It should have been selling out forever. If they had Roy Shires working Los Angeles, it would have been a goldmine. The promoter didn't care about anything, especially wrestlers. That was the bad thing about the regional system, a territory was horrible if the guy running it didn't care. Rod Fenton would go to the track and if he'd lose, your payoff went down. Nick Gulas's reputation without a doubt was that he was the biggest thief, the most ego driven horrible promoter in the country, so people that went up to Tennessee were people who couldn't go anywhere else. They just could not go anywhere else. There were people like Dory Funk Sr. who was one of the most colorful promoters. I mean the bullshit he would pull on you would just drive you nuts, but later on in life you would die laughing because the guy had balls and the guy had color. He lived his life like that. I was talking to Terry the other day, because Terry reminds me of his father - and Dory Jr. doesn't remind me of his father, but Terry does. And we were just dying laughing about some of that stuff.

I love to talk to Ron Fuller. You know Ron Fuller is a successful businessman, he owns two hockey franchises now. He owns the Cincinnati team and the Nashville team. His father was so disliked, Buddy Fuller, because he was almost like Darth Vader when he came into areas because the boys knew they were going to get screwed. None of the boys liked him. Ronald Fuller and I one night were sitting in Tallahassee one night after the matches and we were dying laughing about his father. That's when I really started liking Ron Fuller because he could laugh about his own father because he knew what a scoundrel his father was. I'm not saying that he knocked his dad or didn't love him, but he was enough of a realist that he could laugh about it. Ronald Fuller is a fantastic guy. He was a great performer, a great promoter. He was a great guy. His brother, Robert, didn't have any courage or any carry through at all. Robert didn't grow an inch in all his life. But Ronald was a real businessman.

KELLER: How about the issue of testing for steroid (editors note: the bulk of the discussion of steroid was printed in issue 135 of Torch Weekly. These are additional comments said directly after what was printed in issue 135)?

WATTS: For instance, it can be compared to my view on dope, and I am against it from the things I've seen on it. I've seen what it's done to the wrestlers. But I think we are a hypocritical nation. There are more people that die of alcoholism than of dope. So for me they ought to make the damn dope, if they want to, legal. So I'm not saying that I'm pro-dope, but I think it's totally ridiculous that we can say alcohol is legal when there are more people killed by alcohol induced car wrecks and alcoholism than we lose in our fuckin' war, and then to say that we should create a war on dope. And my biggest problem with the war on dope is the violation of our civil rights where they can come on a person and take everything if they determine it's dope-related. That's what I believe. The same thing I believe with dope. The same thing I believe with steroids. If some idiot is stupid enough to shoot himself up with that shit, then let him shoot himself up with it.

KELLER: What about the promoters that promote the bigger, more muscular guys? Then the promoter creates an economic advantage to steroid users.

WATTS: You need to have the promotional ability to take advantage of more than one size and Vince just doesn't choose to, so when you had other territories, you still had other places to work. So it's not a problem of steroids, it's the product that there's only one guy running the business, so he can tell ya', "either do it my way or go be a security guard." That you can't blame on steroids and that you can't just blame on Vince. Everybody had a part in that. You see what I mean. It's just like if America puts down an edict, if America is powerful enough to do it, does that mean you've got to do it. Does it make it right that since they decide that they're going to have a war on drugs - which is a total hypocrisy - that all your rights under the Constitution are suspended because you're caught up in that war? They've changed our Constitution anymore, so that makes it right because America is doing it. Shit, we weren't even supposed to be taxed under our Constitution, and look what they've done. They broke the heart of America with Reagan's tax deal because it's fucked every businessman. And so they didn't even grandfather it in, saying you can finish writing off this limited real estate partnership you're in, but don't start another one because that was the law. Instead they said no, so you were hooked into them and had to pay the everything and you can't deduct the interest and it broke everybody. They made it the law. In the I.R.S., you're guilty until proven innocent. Here they've given something in our Constitution that was never to be, a personal tax on our citizens - that's why we fought the fuckin' war. They took that away from us and now they're one step further and they made ya' guilty until you prove yourself innocent and you're fighting a bureaucracy that can rape ya' and go right up to the trial in five years and then drop the case and you're already broke because they've taken you're home, they've taken your bank account, and gone to every single sonofabitch doing business with ya' and intimidated them, and believe me, they will. They'll go to your bank. You have no privacy in banking. Why the fuck shouldn't you have privacy in banking. Go back one step further. If you own a business and you put the money in it, why shouldn't you be able to discriminate. It's your business. If free enterprise is going to make or break it, you should be able to discriminate; it's your business.

It should be that, by god, if you're going to open your doors in America you can discriminate. Why the fuck not. That's why I went into business, so I could discriminate! I mean really. I mean I want to be able to sell to who I want to and be able to serve who I want to. It's my business, it's my investment. So they come in and say no. I can't tell a fag to get the fuck out. I should have the right to not associate with a fag if I want to. I should have the right to not hire a fag if I don't want to. I mean, why should I have to hire a fuckin' fag if I don't like fags. Fags discriminate against us don't they? Well, don't they?

KELLER: I don't know.

WATTS: Sure they do. Do Blacks discriminate against Whites? Who's killed more Blacks than anyone? The fuckin' Blacks. But they want to blame that bullshit "Roots" that came on the air. That "Roots" was so bullshit. All you have to do if you want slaves is hand beads to the chiefs and they gave you the slaves. What is the best thing that has ever, ever happened to the Black race? That they were brought to this country. No matter how they got here, they were brought here. You know why? Because they intermarried and got educated. They're the ones running the Black race. You go down to the Black countries and they're all broke. Idi Amin killed more Blacks than we ever killed. You see what I mean, that's how stupid we are. But we get caught up in all this bullshit rhetoric. And so, it's ridiculous what's happening to our country. Lester Manix was right. If I don't want to sell fried chicken to Blacks, I shouldn't have to. It's my restaurant. Hell, at least I respect him for his stand.

That doesn't make me anti-Black. Ernie Ladd is a guy that I love. I can think of Ernie Ladd as my brother. I've got a lot of Black friends. A lot of Blacks I respect. There are a lot of Blacks where I am their fan. I think they're fabulous. Not only as athletes. But I think they should have the right to discriminate and I should have the right to discriminate. They fuckin' do. They want the right to march, but they don't want toe Ku Klux Klan to march. Well, I think the Ku Klux Klan is stupid, too. I think it is about as stupid, and a hate thing, and I think it is the most stupid thing when they talk "God, religion, and the Ku Klux Klan," but if the Blacks have the right to walk, they have the right to walk, but it isn't that way, you see. That's just the way life is. And every ethnic group that came to this country was discriminated against. The Jews were, the Irish were, the Italians were, and now the Cubans want us to have a bilingual state of Florida. Fuck the bilingual! What made this nation great was you came here and learned our language. You kept your heritage, you kept the things precious to you, but you melted into this big pot that is America and that's why it is such a strong, vibrant nation. That's why people want to get here. But, fuck! We shouldn't have to make our damn language bilingual because they don't want to learn English. Wow, now you really got me going. I gotta' get going, guy.

KELLER: I think we probably covered everything in wrestling and a little bit more.

WATTS: Yes we did.

TORCH TALK

ROY SHIRES

When peers and proteges speak of Roy Shires, they speak of "The Professor" with respect and a bit of awe. Roy Shires was a one-man promoting machine in San Fransisco. Instead of an office, a staff, a booker, and general overhead expenses, Shires ran his territory successfully with the help of his wife on their ranch. Shires was successful, and as you will soon realize, at age 69, he has a vast pool of wisdom concerning the history and evolution of professional wrestling.

WADE KELLER: How did you get involved in professional wrestling?

ROY SHIRES: I wrestled in high school and college as an amateur. Then I went into the service and wrestled in the service. I've spent my whole life wrestling. In Gary, Indiana, I knew the promoter there slightly. The referees there weren't so good, so he asked me to referee, so I started refereeing some matches there. This was in the mid-40s right after the second World War. I worked on the mat a few times, then, with the pros and they told me, "You ought to become a professional wrestler." So they told me who to see, the promoter in Columbus, Ohio, the biggest promoter and booker in the country at the time. When I met and interviewed with him, he told me I had to come back the next day with someone I could shoot with. And for the next three or four months, I had to go in and shoot with different professionals. Most of them I beat, but some of them I couldn't. They beat me. In amateur wrestling you can't use certain holds. You're limited in what you can do and I didn't know some of these professional holds. But they started booking me after four months.

KELLER: Were you a follower of professional wrestling while you wrestled amateurs?

SHIRES: No. I wasn't interested.

KELLER: Did you become a fan as you got more involved in the pros?

SHIRES: No. I never was a fan of wrestling. But I had the background. It was just natural to give it a go and see how I did. I did very good and in about a year I went from preliminaries to main events. I won the Junior Heavyweight Championships. Then I got a manager, Jackson Hunter. He was the manager of Gorgeous George. He always wore a suit and a hamburg - a real formal hat - and always carried a cane. We started making a lot of money?

KELLER: Did you ever wrestle Gorgeous George?

SHIRES: Yes. Twelve or thirteen times.

KELLER: That had to be an experience.

SHIRES: All we were told - because at that time he was really hot, every one of his matches were a sell-out - the promoters asked us to allow him to throw his bobby pins, let his manager spray the atomizer and spray the ring and the audience and you. We always let him do it, because if you wrestled George, you were making a good payday.

KELLER: Do you believe people are correct when they attribute a lot of the showbiz aspects of today's pro wrestling to Gorgeous George?

SHIRES: Yes. This aspect of wrestling originated with Gorgeous George. They used to have a deal where you'd go to Mexico for a certain amount of time and get a guarantee no matter what the houses were. You didn't get any more, you didn't get any less. Dizzy Davis from Houston used to go down there and he'd put the robes on and throw flowers to the people. Gorgeous George, who was George Wagner at the time, said, "Hey, Dizzy, are you going to us that in the states?" Dizzy said, "Shit no. Thes Mexicans go for this shit. People up here aren going to go for it."

KELLER: That's incredibly ironic.

SHIRES: Yeah. So George said, "I thin I'm going to use it." He got in touch with Joh Doyle, who was booker and part owner of th Los Angeles territory. John Doyle was ver attached in Hollywood with some of the bigge stars around. He was actually the impresario c wrestling as far as California was concerned i Hollywood. He was a big gambler. He would g to Las Vegas and drop twenty-thousand dollar and think nothing of it. He was throwing partie all the time, so consequently he had a lot c influential friends in Hollywood. So Georg Wagner asked him if he would handle him. S they got together, and between the two of ther they came up with all of that gimmickry, th bobby pins, the robes, the curled hair, the purpl Cadillac, everything he owned was purple. S what Doyle did, he was smart, he was like th Colonel with Elvis Presley. He got Bob Hope t make a couple of remarks about Gorgeou George. Then everyone said, "Who is thi wrestler, Gorgeous George?" And they didn see him, they just heard about him. And the Johnny got him on some of the programs as walk-on. He strutted. He did the queer han deal, like, "Go away, boy, you bother me." S the people started seeing him at gue appearances. So there was enough interest i him that they started him on the road. And ever place he went he sold out and turned awa crowds. Like the Colonel, Doyle wouldn't l George wrestle at small clubs. He didn't want th people to see too much of him. So naturall Gorgeous George was on his way. The everyone who got into wrestling wanted to b Gorgeous George. I was even guilty of it. Whe I had been around wrestling three months, wasn't wrestling much. So I came up with th "Silver Adonis" gimmick, with a silver rob trunks, hair. I was just as guilty as guys who a coming in with mooseheads on or snakes i bags. But everyone wanted a gimmick. He wa the guy that started the gimmickry in pr wrestling. Now, nobody can get into wrestlin without a gimmick.

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KELLER: Were you around Gorgeous George when things started going downhill for him?

SHIRES: What happened to Gorgeous George was his wife caught him in bed with another woman, so his wife divorced him and took him to the fuckin' cleaners. And Gorgeous George was a big gambler. He would go down to Vegas and drop thirty thousand dollars and think nothing of it. He was a big drinker, too. Between the drinking and not taking care of himself right, he started going down the fuckin' tube. So when I became a promoter down here in 61 or 62, I got to know Gorgeous George pretty well. George was a pretty good wrestler. He married this girl, who would come to the ring with him in her little tights. So I brought him up here to Northern California and put him in all the little towns, but he didn't do very much. I felt sorry for him. It was a big letdown. I always put him in as a special attraction.

KELLER: Before you started promoting, you obviously worked for different promoters. What were some of the big differences in promoting styles you found going from one territory to another?

SHIRES: There really weren't big differences. They were basically the same. Most promoters used the same deal with local television, put the main event wrestler against the preliminary wrestler, and always run the two guys on TV, interview them on the upcoming match, and then go with those guys on top.

KELLER: How did you get into promoting?

SHIRES: Well, it got to the point where my knees were so bad I could hardly walk, they had been torn up so bad. I could have lasted another ten years in the business if my knees hadn't gone. I started looking around for a place to promote. Every place I looked was doing pretty good. A preliminary wrestler friend of mine was going home for Christmas in San Francisco. I said, "Lou, do me a favor. When you're home for two or three weeks, go to the matches and let me know how they're drawing around there." You don't want to go to a territory that's doing well. You want to go somewhere that's down. So Lou comes back and says, "Roy, San Francisco is the shits. They don't even have TV." Joe Malcowich was the promoter. Because John Doyle was so well liked in California, and he was a friend of Jim Barnette, promoter of Detroit, I got him to introduce me to some people here in California. Through all the people I met and John Doyle, I was able to get television on Channel 2, the biggest independent station in that market. We were able to get a sponsor, Gateway Chevrolet. He was showing tapes of wrestling at the time, so we did a live show at 9:00 on Friday night. You couldn't get a better time. So I ran seven, eight weeks or TV and then rented the Cow Palace. The building asked how many they thought I'd draw and I asked why. He said, "You know, wrestling don't draw very well around here, maybe 800 or a 1000 people every week." At that time, the Cow Palace held 16,874 people. I said, "We'll fill it up." So the manager started laughing. I asked, "What's so fuckin' funny." So I told him, "Let me tell ya' something friend, next time you want to laugh behind my back, I'll pick ya' up and throw you right through that fuckin' window. Shut you're goddamn mouth." I hadn't learned that when you're a pugilist you can do certain things that you can't do as a promoter (laughs). I hadn't learned that yet. If you're a promoter, you're a businessman.

"So the manager started laughing. I asked, 'What's so fuckin' funny.' So I told him, 'Let me tell ya' something friend, next time you want to laugh behind my back, I'll pick ya' up and throw you right through that fuckin' window. Shut you're goddamn mouth.' I hadn't learned that when you're a pugilist you can do certain things that you can't do as a promoter (laughs). I hadn't learned that yet. If you're a promoter, you're a businessman."

So anyway, we went in, sold-out, turned people away at the door. People were scalping tickets. This was back in '61. Mitsu Irikawa vs. Bill Melby is the one that drew it. So they were scalping tickets for 50 dollars a seat outside. We turned between 8 and 10 thousand away. There were somewhere around 1600 in the aisles. So the Cow Palace took off like a son of a bitch and I made a fortune off of that Cow Palace. I went down there, and if that thing wasn't close to packed, I was mad as hell.

KELLER: From everyone I've talked to who knew you, they not only say you were the prototype successful promoter, but that you ran everything yourself. You didn't have a staff of assistants.

SHIRES: I'm too frugal for that shit. All the other guys had offices in towns. They rented offices downtown and had to pay rent for that. They had a secretary, a booker, and a bookkeeper. I did the whole thing myself with my wife. I turned half of my garage here at the cattle ranch into an office. She did the book work and I did the booking and every night I was in the town. I always went with logic. That's what I preached. Whenever a wrestler came to work with me, I said, "Let me tell you something, as long as you do something that is logical, the fans will buy it. But the day you don't do something logical, they're not going to buy and they're going to fart you right out of the building. You know, you already know as well as I do that nobody believes in wrestling. Everybody thinks it's fake, phoney, the whole fuckin' bit. We got to show them that it isn't, so we got to be logical." I got a lot of guys mad at me because I didn't go for their style or what they did. I made enemies. But like I told the guys, "I don't give a fuck whether you like me or not, but you gotta respect me. I don't bullshit ya', I don't lie to ya', I pay ya' good money." I was considered the best payoff guy in the business. So under those terms I didn't care if they liked me. But if they didn't respect me, they're ass was going out in nothing flat.

KELLER: What were some of the ideas that you turned down?

SHIRES: This one stuck in my mind. One time one of the wrestlers suggested that we have a tag match with the United States Champion in there, and if the United States Champion loses one fall to a guy on the other team, then that guy wins the United States Heavyweight Championship. I said, "Hey wait a minute. That's a little far out and it may draw. I don't know. But who's going to believe that. You're talking about the United States Championship, not some tag team deal." So a couple of wrestlers liked the idea. I wouldn't go for it and they got mad at me. That's one of the things over the years I wouldn't do. There wasn't logic in it.

I used to see people run to the mat, take a knife, scrape blood off the mat on a piece of paper and have it analyzed to see if it was animal blood. People believed you had a capsule in your, broke it, and then you reached in your mouth and smeared it on your head. I told people it was real blood. You can't convince the people.

But if you take a logical approach, I think you're more successful. A lot of promoters did the gimmick shit, it was gimmick after gimmick after gimmick. It's like wrestling today, I look at it and I... I used to defend wrestling. If you fuckin' said wrestling was fake, you'd have to fight my ass. But I don't do that today. People ask me today, "What do you think of wrestling today, Roy?" And I say, "It's a fuckin' circus. And they say, "Yeah, that's what we believe, too." And I just shut up then. I'm glad the guys are making money, that it is drawing. But it's become a fuckin' circus.

KELLER: When you look at the 80s and the expansion by McMahon, do you look at what he led as being good or bad for the business considering the time frame he was dealing with?

SHIRES: You have to realize what Vince McMahon was able to do in his day versus what I could do in my day as a promoter is tremendous. When cable came in town, Joe Blanchard was on cable TV. When I wrestled and promoted, your wrestlers were local bigshots. If you had television in San Francisco, then people from 80 miles around knew you. But when cable television came around, you became a national celebrity rather than a local celebrity. So people considered you a bigger star because you were seen all over the country. So it helped put a little more glamour into it for the wrestlers. When cable first started, nobody wanted to be part of it, so cable would pay the promoter to air their stuff. But Junior came along and said he'd do it for free. Then it got to where some guys tried to get it away from him and he started paying for it, then. His dad was a very wealthy man and he inherited the business. So in essence he was a big time promoter, not a small one. With it being a national deal on cable, that was the difference between why wrestling came under a bigger scope and people looked at it as more of a major deal than they did with the local television deals.

"MACHO MAN" RANDY SAVAGE

KELLER: Do you think that is good?

SHIRES: Yes, I think that is very good. Except Junior, if you want to know the truth, doesn't know his ass from a fuckin' hold in the ground. He pays everyone to call the shots for him. I know Junior very well. I knew his dad very well. I worked for his dad twice. After I became a promoter, we became good friends. I knew Junior and Junior was strictly an announcer and should have stayed there. But the old saying is, if you an afford to hire people that know the business, they can run it for ya'. And that's what I think is happening. They tell me, and I don't associate myself with wrestling anymore, but guys will call me. The other day I got a call from Martinez from Buffalo, Pedro Martinez. That was his territory when I was wrestling. He had Buffalo and Cleveland and others. He called me the other day and said the same old thing. All the old timers don't like what they see today. They all tell you that wrestling is a bunch of bullshit today. But that's what Junior wants, and if Junior wants it, it's going to be that way. He's got Hogan built up so big, he's like a national star. He's almost as well known as Joe Montana. And they tell me that when Hulk Hogan doesn't wrestle now, the houses aren't as good. Now whether that's true or not, I don't know. He has tried to build a couple other stars, when Hogan was away. Poffo's kid, Randy Savage, for instance.

KELLER: Do you think the expansion from territories to national promotions was inevitable. A lot of people say the good old days of territories should return?

SHIRES: If you have a territory, you can run it and draw some money, but you can't compete with the big shows. So you need to be national to make the most money?

KELLER: Do you think there is a place for the style of wrestling that Vince McMahon has promoted, which concentrates more on characters, gimmicks, and selling merchandise than it does creating a legitimate, suspenseful, realistic match?

SHIRES: I tell ya' what, they've gimmicked it to death so much now, I don't think wrestling could go back to the old days. People wouldn't accept it. Because in the old days, it wasn't hyped like it was today. And when it's hyped, there's always that extra adrenaline that makes it more exciting. And so they've done this so much now that if they tried to go back to wrestling - I can review a Hogan match and tell you exactly what is going to happen in it before it happens. He comes out and baits the crowd, what we used to call "cheap heat." Then the match starts, Hogan will push the guy around a bit. Maybe he will get the advantage just a hair. Then Hogan will get beat up and look like he's going to die. Then Hogan jumps off the mat and he'll scream to the crowd, "Should I hit him? Should I hit him?" And he beats the shit out of the guy, and then they'll do the false finishes where he almost pins him, then all you see are hits. I don't think Hulk Hogan knows a hammerlock from a padlock. He doesn't know the first thing about the real sport of wrestling. Then he slams the guy, legdrops him, and pins him. And I've only seen him wrestle eight or nine times.

KELLER: Do you think there should be more variation in matches?

SHIRES: Yeah, I'd like to see more wrestling holds. But the people love it, the kids love it, so who am I to say it's wrong. Old time wrestling would never make it. People wouldn buy it.

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KELLER: Do you think it would be possib for a second group to try a different style wrestling that would attract another who group of fans?

SHIRES: No, I think there's been just to much bullshit put into it. The kids have adapte to this style. This is the mode of wrestling toda and you have to go with that. It's been eight ten years - I don't know how long it's going to b - but wrestling's going down the tubes. An when it does, ain't nobody going to pick it up an put it on the plain it's on now. You can hu wrestling, but you can't kill it. They're hurting now. But to have it back to sell-outs is going t be pretty hard to do.

KELLER: Do you see peaks and valleys i the success of wrestling and in the changes i styles as a natural cycling thing over the years Or is it lower today than it's ever been?

SHIRES: It's lower because th believability level is lower than ever. I think th fans, it's like going to a doctor. When you go i and the doctor tells you something, you believ him. Same with wrestling. When you're ther the adrenaline's going, everything is bein hyped, and you believe it. But as soon as yo leave the doctor's office, you start wonderin about a second opinion and questions you shoul have asked. The same thing happens with a fa He goes home and thinks about the matches an reevaluates the matches. That's what I believ I'm not saying I'm right. This is my opinion an I put thirty-one years into wrestling as a wrestle and a promoter, so I would consider mysel pretty knowledgeable, anyway.

KELLER: Why did you end up leavin wrestling?

SHIRES: A couple of my stations wer fucking me around. They were putting me o Saturday morning at 2:00, then I'm Sunday 9:00, then Saturday at 10:00 or whatever. So told the stations, "Hey, you can't keep moving u around this way. If you keep doing this, I'll hav to cancel this." So I gave them one month notic

Torch Talk Collection: THE EVOLUTION OF PRO WRESTLING

and went off the air and then when you go off TV, you close down. Then I put Kansas City wrestling on the air and that was terrible. Then I played Don Owens's shows which were better, but I could never get wrestlers I wanted because they were being featured in his territory. Then I tried Eddie Graham and the same thing happened there. So finally I got out of the whole thing. No sooner did I get out then Verne Gagne came in. And he did fair. Then Junior came in and wanted to rent the Cow Palace. I knew everybody at the Cow Palace and they respected me. They asked me if I should allow Junior in or just tell them that Verne is our guy. I said, "Very simple, go with Junior. He's got the big guns, the big money. That's what's going to draw." Verne got mad and went to Oakland and stayed there and then Junior finally ran him out of business there.

KELLER: What was it about Verne Gagne's promoting that made him less successful in that area than you were?

SHIRES: Gagne had his own style. He was the most colorless guy I've ever seen in wrestling. He was just blah! His interviews stunk, his wrestling had good moves, but there was no charisma about the guy. He lacked charisma. In Minneapolis where he owned the town and was promoter, he was number one. He owned the territory, was the promoter, was the booker, and he was champion. What else can I tell ya'?

"Gagne had his own style. He was the most colorless guy I've ever seen in wrestling. He was just blah! His interviews stunk, his wrestling had good moves, but there was no charisma about the guy. He lacked charisma. In Minneapolis where he owned the town and was promoter, he was number one. He owned the territory, was the promoter, was the booker, and he was champion. What else can I tell ya?"

KELLER: Who was on top for you in the last couple years?

SHIRES: Ray Stevens. Ray and I were the tag team champions in the Indianapolis territory. So when I came out, I brought him with me. I put him and Irikawa on top and evaluated who was best. When he and I did interviews together, I did all the talking. When he came out, he didn't know a thing about doing interviews. I saw a great future in the kid, though. I knew if he listened to me, he could be one of the best workers in the business. I'd chew his ass out and if he gave me any static, I'd give him a shove and tell him, "Listen to what I tell you or I'm going to kick your ass all over." And I could do it, too. Ray didn't know a hammerlock from a padlock, either. When he came out, I started writing his interviews for him. I'd send interviews to him in Indianapolis and I told him all week to study it and have it down pat when he came in for television. He never had it down pat, but I had Ray billed out of New York City, born and raised there. He "couldn't stand anyone from anywhere else." So I told Ray, "San Francisco is supposed to be the prettiest city in the United States. Knock the shit out of it. Knock the girls, that the girls in the East are better looking and smarter. Call it Frogsville." Nobody had ever knocked San Francisco before. He called all the Westerner's "pencil necks."

DICK THE BRUISER

When I used to use that "pencil neck" deal, I used to carry a pencil with an eight ball on the end and I said this is what a western pencil neck looks like to me, signed "Professor Roy Shire." My manager used to toss it to the crowd, they'd break it and throw it back in. One day I realized this was costing me money. So I got on TV and I said, "You know, all you Western pencil necks, you take my pencils and destroy them. It's an honor for you to get one of my pencils. From now on, if you want one of my pencils, it will cost you a dollar." We never got any dollars. Tom Bradshaw was the announcer and he'd always mention it during our interviews. Then in started coming the dollars, little by little. It got bigger and bigger. I was only paying about six cents a piece for those things. I was making a mint. So I got Ray on that stuff. So then Joe Malkowich forced Channel 2 to put him on television. So he brought in Freddie Blassie who didn't look as good as Ray, but he was a bleached blond, and was arrogant and sophisticated. So he started calling everyone "pencil necks." Every time he said that, the people would refer to Ray then. If that was me, if I was Malkowich, I would have brought in the opposite guy. Not a carbon copy, that's the worst thing you can do. Within six months I ran Joe out of business.

KELLER: You worked with Bill Watts for quite a while. What do you think of him as a wrestling mind?

SHIRES: Bill came to work for me out here. He worked for me for about a year and a half. He's a very astute student. He watched me. He asked me questions. He asked, "Can I ride with you so I can talk to you." So he was always diggin' in me to try to find out more about the promotional part of wrestling and booking and so on. This is what I heard from the boys. He gave a lot of the credit to me for what he learned from me. Also he was a guy, too, that went on logic. I did the same thing when I was in Salt Lake City. I was a wrestler and I was doing the booking for the territory. So I had experience. In other territories that I worked, Jim Barnette used to come in to me all the time asking for ideas. Whenever I'd see Barnette, I'd always have four of five ideas. I'd give them to him because he didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground when it came to wrestling. He was always pumping guys, picking their brains. So it made me think more than I'd ever thought before. So I stepped into promotion, I had a slight background in running territories, so that helped me a lot.

KELLER: What do you think of Jim Barnette, who has been around wrestling for so long and is now with WCW?

SHIRES: Barnette was a great guy for television. He could get a television station when no other guy could get it. But that was as far as he could go. When it came to the booking and who to put together, the finishes, the whole deal, he didn't know anything. He was smart. He'd always come in and ask. Like one time he asked, "If I put Bruiser and Man Mountain Dean against you and Ray, how do you think that would draw?" "I think it would do good." So what we did was take Bruiser, who was considered the number on top heel in Indianapolis and they made him go against us. He and Crusher teamed against us. And Bruiser said, "We're going to be the bad guys." So I told Ray, "We've got to teach this asshole a lesson." The people are booing both of us. So I start what we call cutting meat, that's punching the shit out of a guy and breaking all the rules. So he started cutting meat on me. So Ray tagged in and he cut meat on Ray and then I'd tag in and same thing. Well, it ended up I got pinned and the crowd went crazy. Bruiser and The Crusher were the babyfaces. From that day on what we'd do was work against Bruiser and he was always picking up another top boy. We'd go into Indianapolis at the fairgrounds and I think we sold out the place fifteen or sixteen times. So that's what I used to do to guys who thought they could heel over me. When they told me to do something, I'd say "sure" instead of arguing with them. But then I'd do the opposite. They thought it was going to work, but it always worked in my favor.

KELLER: What did you think of Eddie Graham?

SHIRES: Eddie was a good worker. I liked Eddie. Eddie, as far as IQ, wasn't very smart. But he was smart in our business. He was a guy that could move. He was a mover. He could move people. He could move towns. He had a lot of logic. Not as much as I had, but he had logic to his deal. Some of the things I think that he did wrong were my opinion and not his, but what the hell, it was his territory and he did what he wanted to. I just couldn't believe when they told me he shot himself. I couldn't believe it. Eddie and I were good friends. Somebody called me and told me Eddie shot himself and I thought it was a rib on me. When I found out the circumstances, the guy was very depressed. He was an alcoholic. And there were a lot of other things that happened right before he killed himself from stories I heard. Eddie came from nothing, a very poor kid with no education to a millionaire, it's tough to walk away from that.

KELLER: What did you think about Vince McMahon Sr.?

SHIRES: He was a good promoter. The only thing I didn't like about his style was that he liked the super-heavyweights. I never liked the super-heavyweights because they can't give you a good match. They lay on their ass all night. When I came out here in San Francisco, I brought the smaller guys, around 230, 235, 240, and wow, action! With that I was able to wipe Malkowich out. But now people are acclimated to that in New York, so consequently he's done it so many years that they don't know anything else. Big guys lying on their asses doing nothing. I think if a guy went into New York, it would take him a long time with the smaller guys giving a lot of action. I think it could get done, but you wouldn't do it overnight. But I think Senior was a good promoter.

KELLER: What do you think about the growing role steroids have taken in pro wrestling? Do you think it's the promoter's choice to rid wrestling of steroids or is it each wrestler's individual choice to take or not take them?

> "I told (my son) steroids affect people differently, some the heart, another it hurts their kidneys, and others their sex life. Here's a 25 year old guy and that made him think. So I convinced him in two seconds not to mess with steroids."

SHIRES: They're a very big part of wrestling today. When Hulk Hogan comes in with his fantastic body, you look at him and say, "Hey, here's a guy whose made over one million dollars each year. Heck, I'm going to take steroids, too." It's like that Gorgeous George deal. The boys start using steroids because, let's face it - I still lift weights. I started lifting in 1946, but never had steroids. I bench-pressed 460 pounds and that weight I lifted on my own. I didn't need steroids to lift that weight. Superstar Graham worked for me. I used to marvel at his body. In those days he had a better body than Hogan does, he had more definition. I never knew it until I heard a story about it, then I saw him on Entertainment Tonight, that he used steroids. Then I saw that thing on Lyle Alzado. If I was still in wrestling, I would try to discourage every single wrestler from using it. My son is a weightlifter in Phoenix and the guy that was training him had used steroids before. So I was always a little worried about my kid. The last time I saw him, he was 160 pound weakling and a dope addict, the next time I saw him two or three years later, he was a health fanatic and a bodybuilder. He went up to 195 pounds, so I got worried. One time we were talking about steroids and from the way he talked, it sounded like he was going to try it without saying it. I told him it was his health, his body, his life. I told him steroids affects people differently, some the heart, another it hurts their kidneys, and others their sex life. Here's a 25 year old guy and that made him think. So I convinced him in two seconds not to mess with steroids. Well, they aren't worth it. So you have a little better body than I do. In our day it was "no pain, no gain." Everything we got, we got through pain. Maybe we weren't built as good as some guys today, but we weren't very far behind.

KELLER: As far as what you've seen in Japan, do you think they have a pretty good idea on how to promote wrestling with a sense of realism and would that style be successful here?

SHIRES: Junior's gone so far, it might be tough for him to change it. Maybe it would work gradually. But not an about-face.

KELLER: As a final question, what advice would you give to promoters today who are facing declining interest in their product?

SHIRES: Advice don't mean shit. But I think the only trouble is the advice I would give would cost them money. But most promoters, including me, don't want to lose money. But I think if they would try to get back to the basic deal of giving a little more wrestling, gradually do it, and bring in somebody who could take Hulk Hogan's place. He's a god now. I wouldn't bring in another blond musclehead. The guys that have replaced Hulk Hogan, they didn't seem to have the charisma that Hulk Hogan had. The guys they bring in are loudmouths. Today, when you see an interview on wrestling, it's all screaming and hollering. Heck, when I was in wrestling, I was "The Professor." So I went into the dictionary and learned words. The announcer on TV asked me one time, "What do you think of the opponent your wrestling Saturday night?" And so I said, "He's a very good wrestler, he's very knowledgeable, but he lacks spizerinktum." He said to me, "What does that mean?" I said, "In layman's terms, that means 'guts'." I never raised my voice, I never got mad. So I think he should pick somebody out like that, that was different. When I was "The Silver Adonis," I was a babyface. I used to do a lot of research in psycho-semantics, so the guys in the dressing room called me "The Professor." So one day the promoter told me I was going to become "The Professor" Roy Shire and you're going to strut. I said, "What?! I don't know how to strut." So I had to practice every night for an hour or two hours in front my mirror in my room - I had one room in a rooming house because I had no money. And I got really conceited and good at the strut. You know how when you see somebody walking down the street with a little strut to them and you automatically dislike them. I did that and was so conceited. If I was up north, I was a southerner. If I was in Atlanta, I came from Chicago. I used to pit the South against the North, the East against the West.

So anyway, they need to find somebody that is completely opposite. If they try to bring in another Hulk Hogan, they'll all think of Hulk Hogan. But people know it's not real. Vince won't defend it in these magazines and newspapers. He don't come out and say it's phoney, but he doesn't say it's real either. He has his own phraseology. He has done a good job in doing what he did.

I don't give Junior the credit for what happened, though. I give it to cable TV. He just happened to be in the right spot at the right time and capitalized on it. I don't think he's not a brain. It's not that I don't like him. I always liked him, although I didn't have much to do with him.

TORCH TALK

LOU THESZ

Lou Thesz is considered by many, if not the greatest of all-time, the greatest of his day in professional wrestling. His involvement in professional wrestling dates back to 1936 and he has seen the evolution of wrestling first-hand over the last 55 years. In the following "Torch Talk" interview, Lou Thesz talks about his career, some of his fonder memories, and his thoughts on the way wrestling has developed and changed over the many decades that he has been involved.

KELLER: How and when did you originally get invovled in pro wrestling?

THESZ: In St. Louis I got started. My father was a Greco-Roman from Hungary. At eight years of age he was tutoring me in some of the exercises in Greco and those exercises are more important, actually, as a youngster than actual wrestling. That is because physically the kid is not ready. From there I entered the amateur ranks and at 14 I was in amateur competition. Then right before I was 17 I was a professional wrestler.

KELLER: What year did you debut professionally?

THESZ: Very early '36.

KELLER: Talk a little bit about your first few years in pro wrestling, how your body adjusted and how you mentally adjusted?

THESZ: Well, the body was in good condition. The money wasn't there, of course. And that was in the middle of the depression and our country was in great trouble at that time. You couldn't get a journeyman job anywhere. I wrestled around Missouri, Iowa, Minneapolis, Nebraska, and there wasn't a lot of money around. But that was okay because it was good training ground. Going back to DeMoines - that was where most of us lived - one fella had a car. We'd go over a farmer's fence and get some corn and stuff. That's the way we lived. We didn't think it was tough. We just thought that's the way it is. But it was a good training group. The Midwest has always been a seed of wrestling culture. There were a lot of good wrestlers over there.

KELLER: How did you develop into one of the all-time greats? What were keys to your success?

THESZ: It was a labor of love, actually. If you really enjoy what you're doing, it isn't work. If you enjoy swinging a sledgehammer, it isn't work. But, like I said, we had some great coaching. In the Midwest there were a lot of old wrestlers who could really teach you the basics of the game. St. Louis at that time was the real seed of wrestling culture. A lot of the big boys trained there. Why? I don't know. It seemed to be a central location. Chicago had some of that also. We had a lot of big names like Ed "Strangler" Lewis, Ray Steele, Jim Londos, a lot of the biggies. I was trying very, very hard to succeed as a wrestler. I trained constantly seven days a week and enjoyed what I was doing. And later I was lucky to do something I loved so much and make a livelihood doing something I loved.

KELLER: What are some of the memories that stand out most from your wrestling days, either good or bad?

THESZ: Well, for a couple, three years in St. Louis the training was a wonderful thing because we had great people there. We used to play doubles handball and win a few bucks off of businessmen (laughs). Those are my most memorable years. Us youngsters that worked out with Ray Steele and Ed Lewis, who were successful financially, were generous and magnanimous with their time. Later, after I became a big success, they were my biggest boosters. They introduced me to sports editors. and radio people - there was no TV at that time, of course. And it was a wonderful life. My cup runneth over because we had people like that in that wrestling. My parents were very helpful in every way. My mother was German, my father Hungarian. I sometimes had two, four, or six wrestlers at my parent's dinnertable on Sunday. My mother would kick up a storm. My father made wine and we had beer and it was a nice, nice thing. The hospitality was always there. We lived that way. My father was not only a Greco-Roman wrestler, but a great wrestling fan. He loved these guys. He wouldn't let them leave without having a bottle of wine under their arm and some food to take back to the hotel. My father was fairly successful as a businessperson during the depression. You couldn't get a job for ten or fifteen dollars a week and my father was making sometimes one-hundred dollars a day fixing shoes. He saved his money and lived a very, very ostentacious life compared to most of the Hungarian persons who came from Europe. That rubbed off and I liked the success that he had. I never wasted money, but I lived well. Years ago a lot of us old-timers could get a motel room for a dollar or two. If you paid as much as three dollars, you got a first class room in a first class hotel. If you watched your money you could eat three meals a day for a dollar. That seems ridiculous today, but a loaf of bread was a nickle. My wrestling coach took me to a lot of good restaurants, though. It was a very, very good life. A lot of the people involved in promotion at that time were not just money-hungry. They were really concerned with the people that were working for them. That's all over today. It's dog eat dog and if steroids kill them, that's their problem.

KELLER: Who are some of the promoters that stand out in your mind as being really generous and a credit to the business?

THESZ: Joe Stecker was great. His brother Tony Stecker was great. Pinky George, a former fighter in Des Moines. Tom Pax in St. Louis. Max Leighton in Omaha. Joe Malsowitz in San Francisco. A lot of people. I never dwelled on the negatives. When I knew we were getting robbed at the box office, we didn't worry about it when we didn't have control. Later I had some control and eliminated some of those people. I did it very quietly without a lot of noise. I shut their talent off. When you turn their water off, that's the end of the ballgame, you can't fill the well again. There weren't that many and I don't want to get into those names because they have relatives living.

A fellow by the name of Paul Jones from Lincoln, Nebraska, he and I had a great rapport. He was a good wrestler, too. We just enjoyed each other. One of the greats that died just recently is Mike Mazurki, a movie actor, played basketball for Manhatten years ago. Then he wrestled and did quite well. We got to be tight friends and he introduced me to a lot of Hollywood people. We just had kind of an understanding, if you saw another person and he was a talented wrestler and he tried to help the sport, we tried to help each other. Just recently I won a wonderful award. Mike Mazurki was President of the Caulliflower Alley Club. They just named me as President of Calliflower Alley Club.

KELLER: I heard about that. Congratulations.

THESZ: The reason I mention that is that's the way we hand down things we've either developed or inherited. And we don't do it unless we believe the person is deserving. Like when I main evented on the first $100,000-plus gate in this country. Mike was in my corner and didn't make a dime off of it. He trained with me constantly. He was doing very well in the movie industry and didn't need my money.

KELLER: What are some of the matches that stand out in your mind?

THESZ: As a kid, I was twenty years of age when I won what was at that time the undisputed championship. That was before everyone had their own champion and their own TV channel. They manufacture titles like you make popcorn. A very important match was at twenty years of age I beat Everett Marshall in St. Louis. I was ready and I knew that because I had some great, great coaching. For a 20 year old kid, that's quite a happening. But that doesn't mean that you change your lifestyle. I didn't at all. I drove the same car. If I had a big take somewhere, I just put it away like I never had it, that way the well never runs dry, you always have something to run back to.

Years ago they did a lot of manipulation in booking a guy properly or improperly. As a matter of fact, I won the title by having Everett Marshall booked improperly. I maybe shouldn't have beaten him at that time. We're talking about a three hour match. That was a real thrill. Each time you win the title it's a thrill.

I went to a little match here last night, just a couple thousand people there, that's all. It kind of reminded me of what we'd done in the past. I have a young wrestler, Mike Flemming, that I'm pretty high on. He's a very good wrestler. It was de ja vou. This is what happened to me. What they go through to get started is really unbelievable. When they have the courage or the conviction, you can't stop them. They go. And with that kind of desire you have a pretty good chance of succeeding. Just going through the motions of learning how to wrestle isn't enough. An intense, nearly insane desire to succeed is a tough guy to beat out, because he doesn't know what he's competing with. They work 24 hours a day and think about moves constantly.

LOU THESZ, 1991

I still like iron myself and workout. I'm doing a book on wrestling, too. It's everything you ever wanted to know about wrestling, it's there.

KELLER: Great. When do you think that will be out?

THESZ: About a year. I've been working on it about ayear. Some people are going to love it and some people are not going to like it at all. But I have a good lawyer. And I'm sure the publishing house has at least one person on their staff. It will really be what you want to know about wrestling. Most of it will be positive. Like I said, I don't like to dwell on the negatives. There are a lot of funny stories. I'm going to tell stories about the people more than about the athletics. I'm going to give them the track record of who the top 25 were and all that, of course. But what I really want to get to is how I started, how we lived, and some of the crazy sex things that occurred. The things that sell books, things that people want to know. You take physical people, be them wrestler or in other athletics, they're pretty risque'. I mean, everything works with these people, if you know what I'm saying (laughs). They might stretch your imagination a little bit. Like Ed "Strangler" Lewis, a wonderful man, a super guy, rated by *Liberty* magazine years ago as one of the top ten bridge players in the world. He's a super guy, made $16 million, and was married seven times. "I was stupid enough to marry one of them twice," he once said (laughs). A wonderful, bright guy. He'd always call me "Hungy" because of my Hungarian background. He had some opinions about things and I never found him to be wrong. He was my mentor, actually. Sort of my father, brother, and uncle, everything wrapped into one.

KELLER: To you, what were some of the most influential or important changes that have happened over the last fifty years?

THESZ: Well, the most influential, of course, was TV. Radio was good. A still photograph was good. And the movies were good. But the instant reproduction you can get with video, you get the exposure there that would have taken fifty years to get otherwise. To really popularize a wrestler who was up and coming, it would take 10 or 15 years. And now it takes a couple months and everyone has seen them. All we saw were 30 second clips or something on newsreels before movies. Now you see whole matches. Of course, what you see now makes me ill, so I don't even watch it. I just don't watch it at all. If anyone asks me, "Did you see that?" I say, "No, I did not." Because I do not watch it.

KELLER: Do you think there are good wrestlers today?

THESZ: You bet. There are good wrestlers We have the Steiner boys, Scott and Rick (Mike) Rotundo, Steve Williams, and quite a few good wrestlers around.

KELLER: You just don't like what is going on in the ring?

THESZ: Nothing is happening. It's all hype usually. I said this on the George Michaels show, "I give them a 9 or a 10 for hype music and marketing, but for content of wrestling I give them a 1 or maybe a zero." I've watched two or three matches without one wrestling hold.

KELLER: I've seen a lot more matches without one hold than one or two. Looking at the last 25 years, the late-60s, 70s, and 80s, what are some of the different promoting styles that stand *out from the others?*

THESZ: Well, what happens is if anyone has a format that they're using - I'm talking about promos and things - then they try to emmulate and outdo each other. They're trying to be even more ridiculous than their competitor. I'm talking about the WWF and WCW now. They're kind of a circus now. WCW I think has some better wrestlers, but the WWF is not only producing, they've told everyone they have a choreographed tumbling act, and not a very good one at times. Comedy is fine, but low comedy is not too great.

KELLER: Do you think Vince McMahon has been bad for the sport of wrestling or do you think what has happened is just an inevtiable change?

THESZ: Well, TV made it an inevitable change. Gorgeous George was a good wrestler, a junior heavyweight, a competent fellow, but not big enough for the big boys. I wrestled him several times and drew big money. Each time I would beat him. People liked that in the post-War era - he seemed to have kicked this whole crazy thing off. And there were other people prior to Gorgeous George who tried something like that. Bob Hope and a few other people helped him in Hollywood. Hope's a nice man, incidentally. One of the few photos I have in my house is of Hope and myself. But he helped him with publicity quite a lot, and was in George's corner once.

KELLER: When you look at how TV was introduced in the fifites and the changes that occured thirty years later in the eighties with cable television, going from regions to national, did it surprise you that such vast changes occured in the eighties. Or weren't you surprised because a similar thing happened in the fifties?

THESZ: Oh, sure, we were going through a transitional thing. I saw it coming because years and years ago wrestling was pretty straight and on the mat without flying or really spectacular things. Unless you were a wrestling student, it was like taking an uninformed person to an art studio. Maybe he can pick a really good one from a really bad one, but he can't go down the middle. But I saw the move coming in. And we all switched somewhat. We all did. At one time, I had more TV coverage than any sports person in this country. I was doing one hour a day every day for public workouts in Los Angeles for the Leone match. Every studio I went to, I got a tremendous amount of coverage. I made a very good livelihood. Japan has pretty well supported me for the past 35 years. And that's a result of doing television because I wrestled a man by the name of Rikidozan in Hawaii. He was a great, great wrestler. He was from the Sumo-style, converted to free-style. They didn't believe anyone in the world could beat him because he had a reputation in Japan that he was like a god. When I beat him in Hawaii, they couldn't believe it. Of course, when I arrived in Tokyo there were ten or twelve thousand people in the airport to see me when I came in. That's where I earned my livelihood. But television revolutionized the sport completely

> "What the WWF's done is good business for now, money in the pocket today, but Vince McMahon and the people who are raping the sport today don't care about the future of wrestling. They just care about the kind of buck they can make today and what can they market to sell to the idiots out there that want to buy it. I've been in rooms when they were discussing those things and those are the terms they used."

KELLER: What were some of the other changes that TV brought about originally?

THESZ: Well, it just gave them a firsthand view of what is actually happening in there. They could check our training methods, which they showed on television. What we do and why we do it. The interviews, of course, were important because you get a pretty good cross-section of the world when you interview them. Some of them even needed interpreters. It just changed everything. To begin with, when you were on television when the television industry was in its infancy, you were like a legendary movie star. Nothing could be further from the truth. But that's how people interpreted it. TV is what really changed the whole thing. It's changed a whole lot of things, just like taking a camera into the courtroom. A lot of things that can happen, like the L.A. police force incident. Of course, they didn't get the part before they beat him which might have balanced the reaction. But that's television and it's revolutionized the world. Like the Desert Storm thing. We were all glued to the TV screen. And as usual, we won the war and then lost it at the bargaining table. I'm telling ya'.

KELLER: To you, besides television, before the Vince McMahon Jr. era, what were some of the most influential changes that led up to the big boom of the eighties?

THESZ: What happened was the wrestlers learned to make more sophisticated moves and we learned more about our craft. We put a lot of international travel in and learned from all over the world. And your style changes a little bit. That made it more attractive. And more promoters were hatching.

KELLER: Looking specifically at all of your travels around the world, especially in Japan, do you see methods of promoting over there that would help the United States?

THESZ: Oh, a lot. That's what's occurring right now. Look at the UWF where you can only lose a match by submission where they adhere to stricter training methods. They seem to be specialists in whatever they do. I met a lot of exchange students in Oklahoma years ago. I sat down and talked a lot with them. They have changed now where they are very, very competent and in some areas, some cases, they're better than some of our people now. That didn't happen because they weren't freestyle oriented. But now, even in winter sports they're getting better.

KELLER: You mentioned you rarely watch today's pro wrestling. What are some of the changes in pro wrestling that could get you back to watching it sometimes?

THESZ: Put the good wrestlers in a position that they would dominate the sport as they did in the past instead of someone who's good on a television interview. If they're good on the stick and maybe can move a little bit, they decide they can use him. When they go to the gym and see a steroid freak, they go, "Do you want to be a rassler?" That's a rassler, not a wrestler. And that's what they're doing and it really hurts the action in the ring. It's low comedy. Any kind of ability, I respect. I don't see enough of it. What the WWF's done is good business for now, money in the pocket today, but Vince McMahon and the people who are raping the sport today don't care about the future of wrestling. They just care about the kind of buck they can make today and what can they market to sell to the idiots out there that want to buy it. I've been in rooms when they were discussing those things and those are the terms they used.

KELLER: So you beleive Vince McMahon is totally out for himself and has hurt wrestling?

THESZ: That's exactly how I feel. Other people, too. Some promoters would promote a dog fight for money. And you know what kind of people I'm talking about.

Torch Talk Collection: THE EVOLUTION OF PRO WRESTLING

KELLER: What do you think about the abuse of steroids in the sport today? Is it just a problem for wrestlers, or is it a problem of promoters and wrestling as a whole?

THESZ: It's not a problem for promoters at all because they're benefiting from the destruction of another man's body. It's been happening in the fight game for years. It's gotten to the point where if they don't have a steroid body, they don't want to put them in a position to make top money. They really don't have any regard for the other person's health. If they had national testing through athletic commissions, all that stuff would come to a screeching halt. But that's not going to happen because politicians are politicians. They'll get to the politicians with money. And you know the way they're gonna go.

> "...we don't know what's going to happen with the steroid thing. The result of what happens there is going to determine which way we go. If the government puts enough heat on this thing and actually puts some of these suppliers away for years, the effects could be very big."

KELLER: Do you think it is possible to get rid of steroids?

THESZ: Oh, if the scare is bad enough and they think they are going to die unless they stop using it. These people are taking things without great knowledge about medicine, 500 to 1000 times as much as they should. It's like garlic in a salad. A little of it is okay, but if you use all garlic it's not a very good salad. And they're killing themselves as they do it.

KELLER: When you were wrestling, did you or other wrestlers feel it was at all important to have a good build or was that totally secondary to what you could do in the ring?

THESZ: Absolutely secondary. Because we had some wrestlers that don't look like the rassler's of today, like a swimmer's body. A good smooth long muscled thing. Even in wrestling training I approve of some wrestling training without the steroids. I still work out and I see some young people, 25, 35, 40 and my muscle tone is as good as theirs, but I keep working at it without a lot of junk in my body.

KELLER: If you were a wrestler of this era as opposed to a wrestler of a couple decades ago, would you have given in to the pressure to use sterois because you were part of a different era?

THESZ: I think there are a lot of good wrestlers who aren't on steroids. I have some empathy for people that aren't making it. Take a guy that's making $25,000 a year trying to survive as a wrestler and he's looking at a $200,000 contract a year. If he gets larger and puffs up and gets on the juice heavily, I can see how a guy who really wants or needs to make a buck could be lured into something like that. I don't have a quarrel with the person, but I think it's bad judgement. Down the road you've got to pay for it.

KELLER: Do you think it is up to the promoter to make sure there is not an advantage in taking steroids?

THESZ: It's not their responsibility. Their responsibility is to make matches that will make money. If a guy comes in with a humongous body, people love fantasy. They see something that is unusual, looks different than the normal guy on the street, the promoter's not responsible. But if they really were responsible people, they would test for it. They test for cocaine, but they don't test for steroids. What does that tell you? The message is growing to be loud and clear, though. It's beginning to show up around the gyms, but in wrestling I don't know.

KELLER: Where do you see wrestling in ten years? Do you see it as being similar to today or being different, more like the seventies with territories?

THESZ: There's a possibility with the steroid thing if the government put some heat on it then maybe it would go back to a little more wrestling or making some sophisticated moves that look like wrestling, not just jumping off the ropes and blowing out knees and stuff like that. Young people are out of business because of that. Territories are a possibility. If wrestling gets down so they can't draw any money with this garbage and everybody knows what it is, then we may have to get back to the basics and that would be the only way pro wrestling would survive. You'll always have the clowns that will get in there with the fat bellies and the loud mouths, that always happens, like Dusty Rhodes and a lot of other people. People that aren't even related to athletics.

KELLER: You've been around wrestling so long, have you observed cycles in wrestling of peaks in popularity and then really low points where people thought it was the end?

THESZ: Yes. We've gone through cycles.

KELLER: Where do you see wrestling today on that pattern of cycles?

THESZ: Kind of in a holding pattern right now because we don't know what's going to happen with the steroid thing. The result of what happens there is going to determine which way we go. If the government puts enough heat on this thing and actually puts some of these suppliers away for years, the effects could be very big.

KELLER: If you decided to get into wrestling promoting today and you had all the money you needed to fund a new promotion and its main goal was to make money, what would its main components be? Regional or national? Gimmicks or wrestling?

THESZ: With an unlimited supply of money, you would have to dominate one of the big cable channels and illustrate what you are doing and spell out that this is going to be a wrestling match. If you got into the real type of wrestling, similar to the style in the UWF in Japan, they're making money with that over there. It could be done here, too, as long as people think it is the real thing and a contest. I think baseball is a dull game. But do you know why it is good? Because it is a contest. That's the reason. If they slammed the umpire at home plate and made a circus out of it, it wouldn't be there long.

KELLER: If you promoted wrestling that was real, or at least looked real like the UWF, do you think the public would buy into it right away or would it take time?

THESZ: It would take time, a training period. People are trained. People love fantasy all over the world. But once they know what real talent is, it would make a lot of difference. It would take a while to train them, but it could come back?

KELLER: Would you do pay-per-views and cable TV or minimize the exposure at a certain point so as not to overexpose the product?

THESZ: Pay-per-view is fine. If you can make money, it makes you able to hire anyone you want to perform.

KELLER: If you promoted a more realistic style, would you still incorporate intro music or gimmicks?

THESZ: I think some introductory music is okay, but not the way they are doing this thing. You would need a code of dress like many years ago in New York and Pennsylvania. You had two trunks, black and yellow. You had to have one or the other. That's all you were permitted to wrestle in.

KELLER: Would you do that?

THESZ: Damn right. I sure would.

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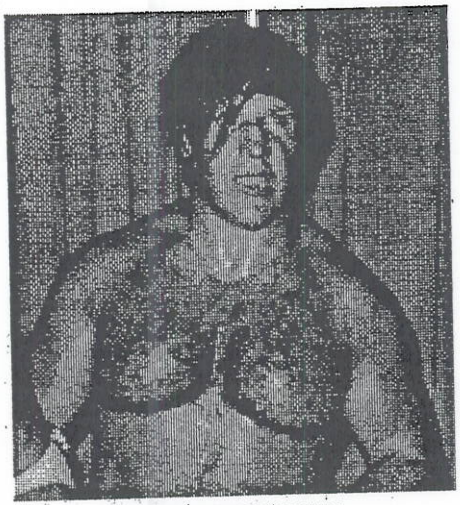

BRUNO SAMMARTINO

KELLER: Do you think that would hinder wrestlers getting over as different personalities or do you think the action should strictly be done in the ring?

THESZ: I think a special robe of some kind is fine. But once the elaborate robe or whatever comes off, there should be some kind of a code that would identify with athletics and not just show business. Maybe it wouldn't have to be just black and purple, but it should not be like they're up on a stage for a burlesque show which is what they're doing now. Gorgeous George started it and it was the first and very effective, but now everyone has music and there is very little substance to back it up.

KELLER: Looking at the last five to ten decades, which do you think would be the best decade to be a wrestler?

THESZ: I'll give you a 20 year span. Between `48 and `70.

KELLER: Everybody is always talking about what can be done to make more money for the promoters or what can make a better product for the fans, but what was it about that era that made wrestling best for wrestlers?

THESZ: Well, we had television that was being used to a pretty decent advantage, but we still had a vestige of ability there. Today I see fellas in there that can't make a wrestling move; they're tumblers. We didn't have a lot of jets to fly in, but the propeller travelling was okay. But with the waits and delays getting to airports today, it's about the same. We were getting a fair count at the box office. Today they have wrestlers on an annual salary. If you get paid what you earn, like let's say you really do your job, you'll draw more money. If you get a percentage of that, you earned your money. But wrestlers under guarantees get into a sing-song attitude and all the incentive is gone. You're just a pawn on the chess board.

KELLER: Was it that incentive that kept you going?

THESZ: I think so. I had a voice in what I was doing. They don't have a voice. If I could see somebody was playing games at the box office, I could alert somebody at the National Wrestling Alliance. We even went to the point of putting clickers on doors. We stopped a lot of that foolishness. They really need an authoritative group over them. Athletic commissioners are normally just tax collectors. They know very little, really. Some do, but so many do not. Rather than collect taxes and just say hello to everybody, they should be doing something.

KELLER: Who do you think were the top five or ten wrestlers of your days wrestling, or of all time?

THESZ: Gene Kiniski, Dick Hutton, Danny Hodge, Jack Brisco, people like that. The good wrestlers. We had a lot of others that were good.

KELLER: What did you think of Bruno Sammartino?

THESZ: A good wrestler. Good wrestler. A better weight lifter than he was a wrestler. He wouldn't be happy about me saying that, but I did think he was a good wrestler. He had the body at that time that captured the imagination of the McMahon group and I guess he was their first real muscle man. He was a very strong guy. But wrestling is different than pushing iron on a bench. The technique, your takedowns, you can minimize the power to where it's rather ineffective.

"NATURE BOY" RIC FLAIR

KELLER: How about Ric Flair?

THESZ: A good wrestler. He's right up there. I like him very much. He's wrestling the same match he was wrestling ten years ago. He should change his style a little bit. He didn't do a lot of international travelling and he didn't pick up as many things. The repetitious matches I don't like. That isn't good for him. For the average fan, that is probably okay. Every time I would go to Japan, I would pick up a new move. As soon as you used it over here, all the kids, all the young wrestlers would start doing it.

You know, for my book, I was putting a list together. I'm going way, way back. But these are the five best wrestlers of all time, legendary, all dead. Ed "Strangler" Lewis, Joe Stecker, Frank Gotch, The Great Gama of Pakistan, and Farmer Burns. I've got a lot of other people here. Jack Brisco, Verne Gagne, Jim Browning, George Gordienko, Karl Gotch, Danny Hodge, Dick Hutton, Antonio Inoki, Jim Londos, Riki Dozan, Billy Robinson, Ray Steele, and a few others here. They're the top, top guys. Other guys here are good, but they're not full circled wrestlers, like Bob Backlund, Fujinami, Ray Gunkel, Iron Sheik, good wrestlers.

LOU THESZ

KELLER: Who are some of the older names that you think would have been just as successful today?

THESZ: Strangler Lewis, Joe Stecker, and Frank Gotch.

KELLER: What was it that makes you think they would be successful?

THESZ: They all were pretty well-rounded out in wrestling. Great Gama, he had a different style that isn't attractive here at all. Farmer Burns was a strange guy, a little off his rocker. But a hell of an athlete.

KELLER: Did you adjust your style of wrestling depending on what part of the world you were wrestling in?

THESZ: No. I just did my own thing wherever I went. I would watch some of their matches to see what kind of moves they made. The rules were often different, like in England, when you slam him you have to have your knee down before you slam them. I liked to do things they hadn't seen. For the wrestlers I was wrestling, if he wasn't oriented with it, he didn't look too good.

KELLER: Any parting words?

THESZ: I've been running in circles, doing this book, and other stuff around here. When you retire, you get busy. I used to have a lot of time for myself, but I don't today.

TORCH TALK

"KING" JERRY LAWLER

Jerry Lawler for over two decades has been a mainstay headline wrestler in Tennessee. Proclaiming himself "The King," he followed in the footsteps of Tennessee legend, Jackie Fargo. Lawler has wrestled all over the country and all over the world, but the vast majority of his time has been spent being a big fish in the Memphis wrestling scene. The Memphis-based wrestling promotion at times was considered a prototype regional promotion, often selling out the Memphis Coliseum. Recently, the Memphis-based promotion, now called the United States Wrestling Association (USWA) has struggled with low attendance in Memphis. At 42, Lawler continues to headline the weekly Memphis cards as the USWA Champion. The only pay-per-view event he has appeared on was in the main event of the AWA's "SuperClash III" against Kerry Von Erich. Lawler, then the AWA Champion, defeated Von Erich, then World Class Champion, in a Unification Match. In the following "Torch Talk" interview, Lawler discusses how he originally got involved in pro wrestling, some of his favorite memories in pro wrestling, but mainly discusses the changes he has seen in pro wrestling over the last 20-plus years.

JERRY "THE KING" LAWLER

WADE KELLER: How and when did you get involved in pro wrestling?

JERRY LAWLER: Oooh. (laughs) Let's see. First of all, I won a commercial art scholarship to Memphis State University and started going there, this was in 1968, and I intended to be basically a commercial artist or something involving art. And while I was there I was majoring in art, and I minored in radio and television. I wound up getting on the Memphis State campus radio station doing a little air shift. I really got more interested in radio than the art; of course, the art was something that I was doing all my life, but the radio just seemed more fun. Though it was actually through a combination of art and radio, there was a local disc jockey in Memphis who was very popular at the time who has since gone on to be one of the biggest names in radio anywhere, Scott Shannon. Anyway, he was working in Memphis at the time. He was doing a contest where they let listeners draw a picture of what he thought some character on his show looked like. Anyway, I entered that contest and won and got to meet Scott Shannon. I mean, he was on the biggest station in the town and all the kids were going crazy over his show. So it was through that contest and doing some more artwork for Scott that I got to be good friends with him and got to hang out with him while he was doing his show and really learned a lot from seeing him work the board. He advised me at the time, "If you ever get an opportunity to get a job in radio, you take it no matter what to get your foot in the door." He helped me make an air check, a demo tape, and I sent it around to all the stations and I got a call from a station, KWAM, a country music station. I hated country music, being a kid and everything. But Scott said, "Take it. It's a job in radio." The ironic thing was I was on 7:00 to midnight, opposite Scott Shannon. I would put on a record and turn up the radio and listen to his show. It was a weird deal. Anyway, the wrestling company advertised on that station. Each week they would send a couple of wrestlers by to do live interviews about upcoming matches here in Memphis. So I got a chance to meet some of those guys - once again it was through my art work - I drew some pictures and caricatures of the wrestlers and Jackie Fargo, the top wrestling star at the time in Memphis, he also owned a nightclub, he and a country music singer named Eddie Bond. So Jackie got in touch with him and he wanted me to come over and paint a whole bunch of caricatures of me and Eddie Bond all over their nightclub. So I painted it up and decorated it. That was my first chance really to hang around the wrestlers.

KELLER: Through all of this, were you a wrestling fan?

LAWLER: Yes. I liked it, but I never even dreamed of getting involved in it. Then when I saw these guys, I said, gee this would be fun to do. Still, through this I was going to Memphis State at the time, the next semester I took a course in amateur wrestling there at Memphi State and got a little bit of a basic background i amateur wrestling. Finally, well, I didn't hav the nerve to tell Jackie Fargo that I was intereste and wanted to try it. So, what happened was, found out they were having some small; ol "outlaw matches" or whatever in West Memphi I had never heard a thing about it, but it was a l of young guys who either weren't ver experienced or weren't very good. They we having wrestling in an abandoned or renovate movie theater over there. So, a friend of mi and I went over there. In the mean time I had m a guy, Jerry Vicors, and he was a guy that to me that they were having matches over there. had wrestled a little bit, so he and I went ov there and he told me that he could probably g me a match. But he said, "You're going to ha to lie, you're going to have to tell this promot that you have wrestled before. He's not going take somebody in off of the street. So anyway went over there, and the promoter's name w Aldrie Griffith, and he said, "Have you wrestl before?" And I said, "Oh yeah, I wrestled so down in Florida." It was one of those de where I felt like my face was going, "Liar, lia I could just look at him and realize he knew I w lying. He said, "Well, we really don't have a opening right now. We've got more guys th we can use. But if something comes up, w call you back." So then I called up my ace in the hole, my last ditch effort just before I was fixing to leave, and I said, "You know, I was just thinking, I'm on a radio station every night from 7:00 to midnight and I was just thinking that if I was wrestling, I could plug the matches." He said, "What? You're on the radio? Well, I can put you guys in a match this Saturday night." I immediately got booked. Anyway, I wrestled there for maybe four or five weeks and I was plugging it really hard on the radio, I was doing a bunch of free plugs for those matches on the radio. Of course, the Memphis organization was advertising on the station, too. So, finally, after about four or five weeks, I think Jackie Fargo came to me and said - because by then he realized that I was wrestling and serious about wanting to wrestle - he came and said, "If I come and get you a match with our promotion, with Nick Gullas, will you quit messing with that group over there and stop mentioning them on the radio?" I said, "Oh yeah." So that's basically what happened. It's still something that I thought I just wanted to try once or twice to see if I could really do it and like it. So then, it was just sort of addictive. Once I actually did it, it was like that was all I was interested in. I didn't care about the radio, the college, or anything anymore.

KELLER: How long did it take for wrestling for Nick Gullas to realize that radio wasn't your thing?

LAWLER: It was just right away after I had my first match in front of a big crowd. I just knew that's what I wanted to do.

KELLER: As a fan growing up, what are some of the most memorable moments that got you hooked as a fan?

LAWLER: It's funny, when I was - I was originally born here in Memphis in 1949 - and then we lived here until 1957. In 1957 our family moved to Lorain, Ohio, which was thirty miles west of Cleveland. My father was transferred with the Ford Motor Company. And that was really the first time I remember seeing wrestling. I'm sure they had wrestling on TV here in Memphis, but for one reason or another I didn't remember seeing it in Tennessee before that. And in Ohio, I guess the TV show came out of Cleveland, but it was based out of Detroit. It was the Sheik and Bobo Brazil. I remember distinctly there were two guys that were the big headliners then, the Tolos Brothers, John and Chris Tolos. And I remember seeing those guys all the time. We lived in Ohio until 1964 and then my father had a heart attack and my father moved back home. And then, of course, coming back to Memphis, then the TV was like a whole different style. The show was a local TV studio show and it was live from the TV station as opposed to up there where they were taped shows from Detroit. Of course, the wrestlers were different then. Immediately it was Jackie Fargo, Sputnick Monroe, Don and Al Green, Tojo Yamamoto. I also remember, too, that I was just going to the matches - my father and I every Monday night - and my favorite - well, being a kid, I was mostly for the bad guys - and my favorite tag team was The Blue Infernos. The smaller one is wrestling now as Gypsy Joe. I was really fascinated with watching him. I drew a whole lot of caricatures. It was funny, The Blue Infernos were having a big feud with The Fargo Brothers, Jackie and Roughhouse, so of course I see Jackie all the time, so I would draw him some cartoons and caricatures of him and Roughhouse just murdering The Blue Infernos, driving their heads through the mat, you know. But the funny thing is, I sat in the auditorium when the matches were going on, my father and I sat in the same seats where Gypsy Joe's wife sat. So I would also turn around and do some cartoons and caricatures for her to give to Gypsie Joe of them killing The Fargos. I didn't realize that they were going back stage and comparing the pictures. I can imagine them saying, "Look at this punk out there, he draws one for you like this and one for me like this. Anyway, it was really a thrill later on - well, Gypsie Joe is still in the area now, still wrestling today.

> "Without a doubt for the wrestling business in general, it would have been much better if it had stayed in regional territories and had everybody not exposed to all of the wrestlers and all of the different styles of promotion at the same time."

KELLER: Looking at the fifties and sixties, there have been obviously a lot of different promoting styles since you've been in the sport. In the early days, when you got involved, as far as the territories that you were involved with, what were the styles of promoting that stick out that had really good things going for them, and why?

LAWLER: I think one of the things that has a major affect on the styles in the different territories has been the history of the owners and the promoters, so to speak. Most of the owners were ex-wrestlers themselves, like Verne Gagne, Roy Shires, Roy Welch down here, and I think that the size or style of those guys was inherent down through the different years of the territories. I know down here, Roy Welch or the Welch Brothers, they were not very big guys and they were not great amateur style wrestlers or anything, and so that style or that influence has remained in this area. This area has always been a junior heavyweight territory. It's always been a territory where the fighting and brawling style was more popular than the scientific or that type wrestling. As opposed to say, for instance, the AWA with Verne Gagne. And, of course, the fans, in the days before cable and the days when they only had one promotional territory in the regions, what they saw was what they got. They didn't know any different styles. Down here they saw the Welch Brothers and the brawling style of wrestling. That's all they were exposed to and that's all they knew. If you brought a guy like Verne Gagne in here and had him clamp on some kind of wrestling hold and hold it for two or three minutes, the people here would be bored stiff.

KELLER: Do you think that limited the wrestling audience, because there were distinct styles in each territory, whereas if there were more than one style even back then there would be more fans, or do you think that it would confuse the issue and bring out the negatives of each style?

LAWLER: I think it would have just confused the issue, just like I think it was best the way that it happened then. Without a doubt for the wrestling business in general, it would have been much better if it had stayed in regional territories and had everybody not exposed to all of the wrestlers and all of the different styles of promotion at the same time. That was what has hurt the business in general when the people have one style to compare to another style. What happens is it just brings out the negatives of all of them.

KELLER: That partially answers my next question. But as you look at the eighties and especially Vince McMahon Junior's expansion, do you look upon what he did as good or bad for the wrestling business?

LAWLER: Oh, it's murderous. It's terrible for the wrestling business. The reason, is as Vince McMahon himself will tell you, he's not in the wrestling business. He says that on the Larry King Show, in *Sports Illustrated*. He doesn't want to be confused with a wrestling company. He's into "sports entertainment," another word for merchandising and marketing. But what he does is prey upon the wrestling fans and wrestling audience to sell his product to and it's just like, he says, don't confuse me with a wrestling company, because that's not what I am. And by the same token, if you were selling automobiles and you were selling Fords, you wouldn't put Chevrolets on your commercial while trying to sell Fords. Well, he's not trying to sell wrestling, so he don't put wrestlers on his TV show. He puts characters on because that's what he's trying to sell. He's trying to sell merchandise, he's trying to do marketing. But the general public doesn't realize that and they just think of these guys as wrestlers and that's really not the case. He has changed it so much and changed the wrestling business, you know, it's just like when people are in the wrestling business you should sell wrestling, you should have to sell wrestling tickets. In our case, that's all we have to sell. We have to sell wrestling tickets. The only way for us to make money is if somebody comes to see some wrestling. Where in his case, he doesn't care as much if people come to the arenas or not. He's going to sell his toys and outfits and cereal and they're on sale 24 hours a day in stores all over the country. Naturally, he's going to make millions of dollars

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more than somebody just trying to sell a wrestling ticket. But, the problem is, with all his overexposure, with him changing the face of what he thinks wrestling is, it makes it difficult for somebody trying to sell a wrestling ticket.

KELLER: Do you think, though, that the expansion from territories to national promotions was an inevitability considering cable television?

LAWLER: Yeah, well, it was going to happen just because of cable, because cable was looking for programming. And, sure, you can't blame Vince McMahon for that. But, I really don't know if that could have been handled any differently. I guess it was just the natural progression. I mean, Vince McMahon was really the first to realize that with this national exposure he could make more money merchandising and packaging characters than selling wrestling tickets. Obviously, you can only have so many wrestling matches per night per week. And like I said, there is no way that could ever compare with all the merchandising that goes along with that stuff on sale in all the stores across the world.

ROBERT GIBSON OF "THE ROCK & ROLL EXPRESS"

KELLER: But McMahon never had the advantage of having Jim Cornette selling his photos at the concession stands. How do you think wrestling would be different if, say, Ole Anderson through TBS was the first to expand and actually was more successful than Vince McMahon early on? Would he have inevitably gone the same route? Would it have been different if anybody else had been the leader of expansion?

LAWLER: Well, I don't know, it's hard to say. They did sort of expand at the same time. Actually, I think WTBS was one of the first ones to expose their product nationally. I guess, for instance, say Ole had been the first one to expand. I think the only difference is that they would have continued to push the wrestling ticket. There is still a negative influence on cable and on expansion in general. Even if they had tried to sell just wrestling, which would have been better for the wrestling business, but the thing that is bad for the wrestling business - and it took a while, but it has already happened - was the fact that, when you used to have regionalized territories and you had guys in your territory, some would stay a short time, some would stay a long time, but no matter how long whichever wrestler stayed, you could always replace them with somebody who was fresh, somebody who was new. You could take somebody who was in your territory for several months and let them go out to another territory or send them out to another territory. As they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder. When they came back, they were fresh and new again. With the expansion into everybody else's territory and with cable, there was no way to do that anymore. For instance, we created The Rock & Roll Express here and we had a good working relationship with those guys. We basically had done everything with them we could, so then we talked with - well, we originally had a deal with Bill Watts and the Atlanta territory then with TBS, where they were going to go down there for six months and they were going to send us someone to take their place. Well, immediately when they left our area, all of a sudden they were on TBS every week and they were still being seen by a lot of our fans every week and it was like they weren't gone at all. So it didn't help a bit, and when they came back later on, it was just like the fans hadn't missed them. Now that's the thing. Basically, people can see everyone who is in the wrestling business every week with cable. So, it's like there's no way to bring in fresh talent anymore. To me, the biggest joke in the world is when these NWA and WWF pay big money to get someone from the other organization. You know, it's stupid, they're nothing new, they're nothing fresh. I don't know, like the thing with Sid Vicious. I guess they're just planning to use him later on down the road to try to replace Hogan since I guess Hogan's talking retirement and all that stuff. I think they underestimate the intelligence of the fan. They know that Sid Justice is Sid Vicious and it's not a big deal that you change your name and all that stuff.

KELLER: Do you think WCW, and before that, the NWA, has done a good job of being a number two promotion since 1983?

LAWLER: No I don't, because I don't think they've been able to make up their mind. I think they should make the decision. And they have the opportunity to do the same thing that Vince McMahon is doing, because they have more national cable exposure than Vince does. So they have the opportunity to do the same thing. But they're riding the fence. They're trying to do part of what he's doing, the Hulkster, the character promotion, but then they've tried to stick with some of the legitimate wrestling style. That's just like if you're going to sell Fords, but you show one Ford and one Chevrolet on your commercial. You say, "Well, the Ford is pretty good, but so is the Chevy." Well, you're just going to confuse the people and you're not going to do as well as you could do.

KELLER: Like having Arn Anderson in th ring with P.N. News.

LAWLER: That's exactly right. Wh you've got to do, you've got to make up yo mind. If you're really going to get in the sam boat with Vince McMahon, then you've got t forget about the men like Arn Anderson an Terry Taylor and a guy like Barry Windhar guys who can wrestle. And then you just got t go completely with characters and go with th style of wrestling. They're really not making th decision one way or the other. They're riding th fence and as long as they do that, they're ju going to flounder.

KELLER: Do you think if they had made th decision to totally emulated Titan, they coul have succeeded?

LAWLER: Oh, sure and they still cou today.

KELLER: What if they had gone the othe route and promoted pure wrestling and not th characters. Would that have worked?

LAWLER: Yes, that would have worke also. It would never be on the same scale Vince McMahon because then what they have t sell is wrestling tickets. They could do that, bu they're not going to make as much money then they were selling dolls and games and toys an all that stuff.

KELLER: Throughout the latter half of th 1980's, what do you think another territory cou have done - the AWA, Memphis, Continenta World Class, USWA, or the UWF - to survive o a national scale with McMahon and still hav been profitable?

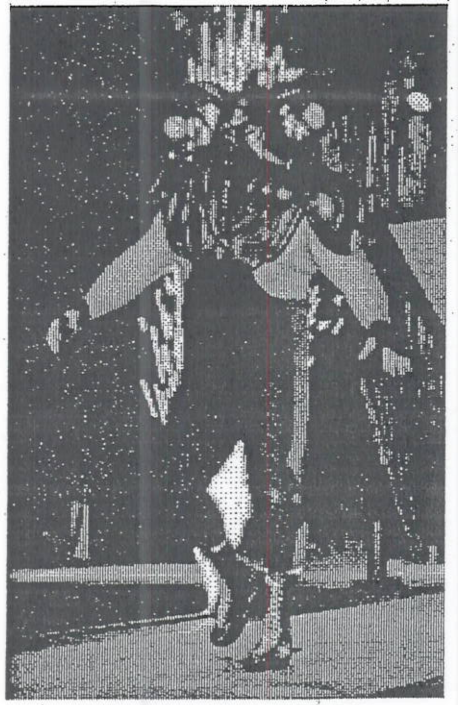
LAWLER: I really, to be honest with yo don't think anyone could have, no matter wh they did. Two is almost too many, but three definitely too many. It would be just like rig now Memphis is struggling, trying to get an NF franchise, and I think if they were to get one, would survive really well and it would do grea But all of a sudden, if you moved two NFL team into Memphis, and then especially if you move three into Memphis, none of them would d anything. There would be no support for them Like, to me, look at Joe Pedicino talk about a the stuff he's going to do. He's going to d nothing. I mean there is no market for a thir group now. It's too little, too late. He's foun some sucker, and he'll use all his money, an then he'll go along his merry way.

KELLER: Do you believe that in pr wrestling, there is a place for highly colorf characterized wrestling with no regard for th action that goes on inside the ring, or do yo believe Vince McMahon could make even mor money if he would stress action in the ring mor than he does in addition to the cartoo characters?

LAWLER: I think he's doing as well as h can with that. I mean, he's got some guys th can wrestle, but he's not interested in exposin wrestling to the people, so he'll put those peopl out for two or three minutes for a squash something because he wants to get on to The Undertaker or The Ultimate Warrior. He's got all of these different characters to try to expose in a show. Instead of feeding fans wrestling, he's trying to feed them a bunch of different characters. All he wants is a little bit of exposure for each one.

KELLER: What do you think about the other extreme, such as looking at Japan wrestling and the way that has been promoted traditionally for the last ten, twenty years where interviews aren't even an integral part of promoting, it is simply showing wrestling to promote future wrestling?

LAWLER: Well, to be honest with ya', I'm really not qualified to give an opinion. I'm not all that familiar with Japanese wrestling. I'm familiar with how successful it has been, but I don't follow it closely enough to know what it is they do differently. I know one thing, their society is so different. The people there are starved for entertainment. The population is tremendous. They are the kind of people that when they get behind something, they have been behind it passionately. The following for wrestling there is tremendous. The following for baseball is tremendous. Their following for gold is tremendous. Their following for snowskiing and gold is unbelievable. Anything like that. Their society is different from outs in that their hard-working people and their entertainment time is limited. Their pleasure time is limited. So, when they do have time to do something like that, they go do it. Unlike our society where everybody is laid back and tried to make as much money as possible for doing as little work as possible. And so the leisure time is not as important to the people over here as it is to the people in Japan. I think that comes into play, in that you can do anything over there and it is going to draw.



BIG VAN VADER

KELLER: Do you think that it was just an education process that made fans buy the product over there with minimal gimmickry in that they also would have bought Vince McMahon Junior's style of promoting if that was what they had been educated to watch. Or would their culture not allow for another style?

LAWLER: I think it would have been successful over there and maybe even more so than what they're doing. If you look, they really are starved for that extra bit of showmanship, but the promoters keep a tight reign on it. I mean, what's some of the biggest things they've had over there, Tiger Mask, Jushin Lyger, Big Van Vader, Dump Matsumoto. The things that have been out of the ordinary and a little bit showbusiness have been gobbled up by their fans. If they were fed a steady diet of bigger and better gimmicks, they would love it. I mean, these are the people that loved Godzilla. You go into the stores over there and there's a whole section of nothing but Godzilla stuff.

KELLER: If Tagar Lord of the Volcano, a wrestler in your territory, was the only outrageous character in the Memphis territory and everyone else was more black and white in terms of gimmickry, like Arn Anderson or Rikki Choshu, do you believe Tagar would get a better reaction. In other words, has the limited gimmickry in Japan been successful because it has been limited, and when the gimmickry is used, it is so well-thought-out and so unique? If so, would that work better in the United States?

LAWLER: I don't think it would work now. It would take such a long period of time to reeducate the fans. What has happened here is that everybody thinks bigger is better and that more is better. I looked at an old wrestling program from 1964 or something and there used to be three matches on Monday night at the Auditorium; they were all two out of three falls, but there were only three matches. Now we have something like 15 or 20 matches. We feel like we always have go outdo what we did before. Back when there was one gimmick, we say, "Well, two gimmicks would be even better." Then three gimmicks is better, followed by a death match and a chain match, and then follow that with a chain match. That's what happens. It's not always right and not always the best thing, but it's human nature to think that way.

KELLER: Looking strictly at Memphis wrestling, what do you believe has been the downfall in terms of drawing one or two thousand instead of near sell-outs?

LAWLER: Oh, well absolutely, the whole downfall is overexposure of wrestling on television. Too much of it on television. Too much of it has been promoted here in town. All these organizations have come in here. I looked at our TV guide a few weeks ago and counted up all the shows. You could watch, if you wanted to, something like 40 hours a week. So when you can do that for free, why are you going to pay seven dollars for two more hours of it.

KELLER: Do you think there is anything that Memphis wrestling could have done or still do to promote differently in retrospect to keep the crowds up?

LAWLER: I really don't. Maybe, had we had control over what the people saw on television. We're sitting here with the WWF which has got like seven hours of TV here in Memphis, WCW has like eight hours, and then there's ESPN, and we have an hour and a half. To the vast majority of fans, naturally you've got about 2000 hardcore wrestling fans here in this town. What makes the difference in the big crowds and when you draw those other five or six thousand fans - not the hardcore fans - the people that are almost casual fans that watch wrestling, is when you really pique their interest to get them to come live. Well, those people are the casual wrestling fans, they're not really into understanding the difference between the WWF, the NWA and our group. To them, wrestling's wrestling. So if they can't catch our show, they can just watch wrestling later or Monday on USA, so what they don't realize - but we do realize - is that they don't see our show. So the audience has been oversaturated and bombarded with all this wrestling. There's a certain amount of confusion there, while it's become more important than ever for people to watch our show, it's become less important for them to see it. It used to be in the past, the only time they could see wrestling was at 11:00 on Saturday morning on our station, and that was our wrestling. So we had an opportunity to get every wrestling fan to come to our matches, the hardcore and casual fans, but now we don't have that same opportunity because our audience has been all cut up.

KELLER: So in a pessimistic mode, why compete then? Why even try it? If Vince has all this television and since he's national, he has all the money to promote the national stars, and the fans know that Vince has the biggest stars, then what is the incentive of continuing to promote?

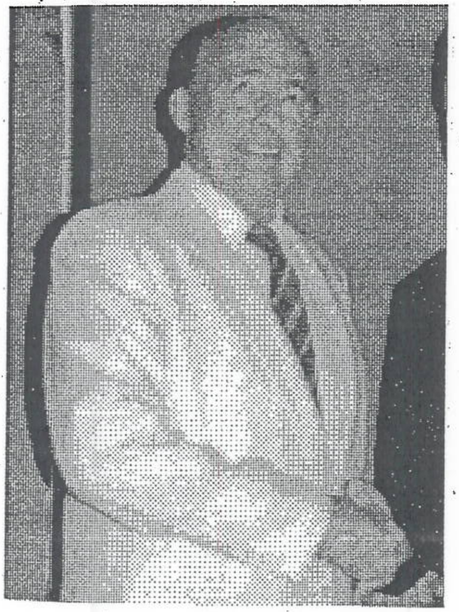
LAWLER: We're not on the brink of being out of business here. We still make money. I make a lot more money than a lot of the guys who are in the WWF or WCW. Because we have been able to run what would be compared to them a mom and pop organization here, we don't have twenty or a hundred people working in our office. We don't have the big overhead of paying for TV reproduction and other TV costs. We still have TV stations that pay us for the show. So we're gonna survive, it's just we've had years in the past where we not only survived, but we thrived and just did phenomenal business. Those days may come back or they may not.

KELLER: But you're content with what you have now?

LAWLER: Yeah, we're content with what we have now. I think had Bill Watts been content with what he had, he would still be in business today and still be thriving or at least doing well. But what Bill Watts did was gear up and try to compete with them on their level. We don't try to do that. We do what we do best. We try to take care of our little area here. We don't go outside of it. We just gear it up and try to protect ourself. We have it now where hardly anybody comes into Memphis anymore. It's not profitable for them. In the past whenever a different group has rented out the Coliseum, we've had free wrestling. And so when they've got the whole country to choose from, they're bottom line is just dollars, if they say, "every time we come to Memphis we don't make a dime," then they won't go to Memphis anymore because they have all fifty states to choose from. So, we're just interested in trying to protect our home here.

KELLER: I'm going to run down a few names of various promoters, and from what you know, what do you believe are the strongest and weakest aspects of their promoting style. Verne Gagne?

LAWLER: (laughs) I'm very familiar with Verne Gagne. I don't know. When I first met Verne, I was very impressed with him. I thought he was a good guy. But I think what happened with Verne was I think Verne just didn't try to change at all with the times. He was so stubborn to a point where he said, "This is the way I've always been so successful, I'm not going to change." Everybody has to have a little flexibility. He just was unchangeable. If he came up with an Edsel, you'd still be seeing them in the showroom now. He'd say, "I don't care what the public thinks, this is a good car.." To me, that's Verne's problem. I don't know him well. I thought I knew him pretty well. We did the pay-per-view thing and he stiffed people with the money on it. To me, stuff like that is really bad. If you make a deal with somebody, you really ought to hold up your end of the deal. Up until that time, the deals with him had been okay.



VERNE GAGNE

KELLER: Jim Crockett?

LAWLER: I never really knew much about him. I watched his style over there. Crockett always ran it sort of like the stereotypical way offices have always been run. He was always the head of it, but he always had a booker to take care of all of that stuff. And the style of that territory was determined by who was booking at the time. I don't even remember if Crockett ever booked for himself. That's one thing with Verne, he always wanted to book it himself, and I think in the past there towards the end, he would try bookers, but he would never let them have a free hand. It was just a booker in name, because he had the final say.

KELLER: How about Eddie Graham?

LAWLER: I worked for Eddie quite a bit. Eddie's style was that he really believed in wrestling and he had the state of Florida educated in that mode. With the Briscos and the Funks, he gave those people some good wrestling and they responded and they liked it. I don't think Eddie, well, he committed suicide before all the big expansion stuff or just as it was starting. I don't think that stuff would have set well with Eddie. I don't believe he would have liked all of the gimmicks and wild stuff?

KELLER: Bill Watts?

LAWLER: Bill Watt's was probably, to me, just based on stuff I've heard about him, a smart guy. What he did when he was promoting locally, he obviously did everything right because he probably had the most successful territory in the country at one time. Along with the Carolinas, his was the best thing going. But I think his downfall was trying to go outside of the territory and spread himself too thin.

KELLER: Do you think if he would have stayed when he was running a successful territory and it had stayed semi-successful, do you think he would have been haunted forever with the thought that he could have been a national promotion but never tried?

LAWLER: I'm sure a guy like Bill Watts probably would have. That's what makes a person like Bill Watts do it, because they believe they can. A person like that, had he not done that, would have always wondered and said, "I know I could have, I know I should have done that." He had that compulsion so strong that he said, "I AM gonna' do that." But now I'm sure he looks around and says, "Gee, what if I would have just stayed around in my own backyard?"

KELLER: Vince Senior?

LAWLER: I only met him a couple of times, like at the NWA conventions. He seemed like a neat guy. He really did. And from what I heard, he was really a well respected friend of all the aligned NWA promoters. It's hard to say. I think that so much of was has happened, and what happened to people, was coincidence. It just so happened that Vince McMahon was sitting in the media capital of the world so that when the cable industry exploded, the only wrestling they knew about what his. They didn't know there was a really good wrestling promotion in Memphis, Tennessee. They didn't know that Bill Watts had a really good wrestling promotion down in Louisiana. They say, "Wrestling? Well, here's somebody right here and we can put it on TV." He was just lucky that he was there. It's like still so many things are determined by people's personal preferences. We have an opportunity to make what I think would be a great marriage. We're sitting right in the backyard in Nashville, Tennessee and t Nashville Network. It's nationwide cable TV, i on everywhere just like TBS and USA, may even more than some of those. And the count music fans are the exact same fans that a wrestling fans. I mean, the country western sta are wrestling fans. We had a show devised th would be definitely Nashville wrestling, country wrestling. It would almost be like a He Haw type show, but around wrestling. Jer Flower was going to be the color man a different country music stars would be on t show each week doing color commentary a different skits and things like that. It could ha been so unique and such a good show. I mea people up north would say, "You think Vin McMahon is something, you should turn on a see what these crazy people do down south." W could have given them a wilder, crazier brand wrestling because everybody in the count would expect that out of people in the sout They think we're kind of goofy anyway. So v went to the head man of the Nashville Netwo and when we walked in he said, "Guys, you' got five minutes, but before we get start talking, I want to say wrestling will be on th station over my dead body. I hate it, I don't wa anything to do with it. You're five minutes sta now." And I said, "It doesn't look like we ne five minutes because it don't look like you' dead yet." And that's exactly what we said a then we turned around and walked out. And l was the ultimate decision maker of Nashvil Network and he just happened to ha professional wrestling. He didn't care that would get great ratings and it would be a uniq show.

KELLER: Is he still alive?

LAWLER: Unfortunately (laughs). He still alive and kicking.

KELLER: Are you familiar with Fritz V Erich?

LAWLER: Yeah (laughs), I sure am. Son of these guys, a lot of the promoters, a b negative for them is nepotism. It's like doggon I've got two sons, but I have seen so mar promoters, that when their sons get of age to l wrestlers, that they give them such a push, i pathetic. It's detrimental to their own busines Let's face it, he pushed himself right out of tl business by pushing his sons. Verne Gagn same thing. Eddie Graham, to an extent, san thing. Nick Gulas completely pushed himse out of the business by pushing his son. There' so many.

KELLER: How about Jeff Jarrett? Do yo think Jarrett's been promoted correctly?

LAWLER: No. Absolutely not. Too muc of a push. And that's an extremely touch subject here, especially for me to talk abo (laughs). But, it's just too much. The ki immediately have two strikes against them ju for being the owner's or promoter's son. All t fans, no matter what, it just goes back to huma nature, every time you see a football team whe the coach's son is on the team, everybody alwa asks, "Is he really good enough to be there or he just there because he's the coach's son?" That's just human nature. That works the same for a kid being in the wrestling business. That's why for my son who's wrestling, I don't want him to use the name "Lawler." That's for two reasons. It affects me. If I wasn't wrestling anymore, fine. But while I'm still wrestling, I don't think it's good for me because the people say, "Geez, how old is this guy if he's got a son wrestling?" Bill Dundee killed himself dead by working the deal showing his son out there, 21 years old. Bill's got a youthful looking face. He doesn't look old. You never heard anybody saying that until Jamie came on the scene and now all ya' hear every time Bill Dundee is mentioned is, "How old is that guy?" or "How much longer is he going to wrestle," or "When is he going to retire." That's just the way people think. So with Brian, I try not to have the association there. Plus, I think it would hurt him because every time the people see him win a match, they would say, "Oh, that's Lawler's son, that's why they're letting him win," or something like that. I don't think he will make wrestling his career anyway. Why saddle him with the two strikes and mess me up in the mean time. Jerry Jarrett, of course, wasn't wrestling anymore when he started pushing Jeff, but god it's hard on Jeff, and it's just a hard thing for the fans to swallow.

KELLER: Looking back to Fritz, he was the first to build such an impressive national syndication network, with the main event matches and the intro music and the special lighting. He started a lot of trends that I think Vince even picked up on. Since he had a head start on everyone, do you think he had a chance with the marketability of his sons to actually move forward and be a competitive national group?

LAWLER: I guess there was a chance, but apparently he was probably a better promoter than he was a parent. When the sons started dropping like flies, there are certain things that happen that can kill your company and your credibility and things like that outside of what you do in the ring. That was one of his big problems.

KELLER: How about Don Owens, who is one of the last territories along with Memphis remaining?

LAWLER: I've never even met him. That's Portland, right?

KELLER: Yeah.

LAWLER: I hear a lot of about it. They mind their own business like we do.

KELLER: Nick Gulas?

LAWLER: Nick was a guy who really came up, he was a really rags to riches story. When he started promoting in Nashville, he literally walked all over town, putting up posters and stuff and literally would stop and cut shoe soles out of his posters and stick it in his shoes because there were holes in his shoes. But he finally had gotten to where he made a fortune from the wrestling business in this area. Nick was a good promoter in that he really knew how to utilize or get something out of nothing. He learned that by having to do that. Nick would run this territory with twenty-five Mexicans. These guys would be here and not have enough money to leave. I would ask Nick why he had so many guys. He would say, "They can't leave. They can't afford a ticket to get out of here." He was successful doing it that way. But Nick's total downfall was George Gulas. If it had not been for George, Nick probably would still be alive today and thriving. He would thrive on adversity. Nick used to love when there was opposition wrestling trying to come in. That was exciting for him. Unfortunately, though, when people see a kid that has had everything given to him, they don't appreciate any of it. Most people are that way. What you really love and appreciate are things that you have to earn and work for. And George never had anybody saying "no" to him and he was always given anything he wanted. He looked like a basketball player, but he wanted to be a wrestler. And Nick would not say "no" to him. And he killed Nick's business and he alienated everyone around him. Next thing you know, Nick was in a nursing home and George came and took his false teeth and sold them. He finally used Nick up. Nick just died in a nursing home a few months ago - a state-run nursing home, too.

> "(Roy Welch) was like a big kid at the matches. He would come in and say, "Hey, horse thief" - he called everyone horse thief - and next thing you know he would be popping you with rubber bands. His mind wasn't on business. I don't quite know where his mind was. I fear someday I'll be coming in the locker room and popping people with rubber bands (laughs)."

KELLER: How about Roy Welch?

LAWLER: Roy, of course, was partners with Nick and actually by the time I was getting into the wrestling business, Roy was already toward the end of his life. He was already getting sort of senile. He was like a big kid at the matches. He would come in and say, "Hey, horse thief" - he called everyone horse thief - and next thing you know he would be popping you with rubber bands. His mind wasn't on business. I don't quite know where his mind was. Anyway, he was more along the lines of Jerry Jarrett and I when he and Nick were partners. I fear someday I'll be coming in the locker room and popping people with rubber bands (laughs). Nick was the big promoter end of it and Roy was the main wrestler. Of course, when he retired from wrestling, he just sort of hung around the office. Nick was basically the promoting end of that.

KELLER: Ole Anderson?

LAWLER: I really didn't know him that well. Ole was always just the boisterous big-bully type guy. I don't know, but I think that was to his disadvantage because he alienated a lot of people. I don't think he really meant to. I think that it was just his nature to be loud and braggadocious. But, I guess Ole could probably book a territory really well, but as far as hanging with Vince McMahon on a national lever, I don't think so. Kind of like Eddie Graham, I don't think his heart is into all of that stuff.

KELLER: Angelo Poffo?

LAWLER: He and his son, Randy Savage, they ran a territory up around Lexington, Kentucky up against us. They were a little outlaw group, an opposition group. It didn't really affect us one way or the other. They weren't drawing enough people for us to even worry about. But finally, he went to Jerry Jarrett, "Look, we've got TV in Lexington and we've got TV in Paducah. We're struggling along trying to produce our own show here each week." They were filming their matches on a camcorder and then running the matches back as their television show. So anyway he told Jerry, "We're just about to go under. Would you be interested in doing a deal. We'll put your tape on our station, but then we'll have a big promotional war. We won't acknowledge that we're becoming partners. But we'll have a promotional war where our wrestlers face your wrestlers." It would be like if Vince and Ted Turner got together and decided to have a big promotional war because one of them was going under and then let Hulk Hogan wrestle Sting, or whatever. So that's what we did, and that did sensational business in Kentucky. It sold out Rupp Arena, 23,000 seats, me against Randy Savage. That was his hometown, so we did phenomenal business with that. But what happened was, we were sending him our tape every week to run in Lexington. Well, he was also dubbing himself off a copy of everything we were sending him.

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So a few years later he took all of those copies of tapes and sold them to someplace out in Los Angeles and they started selling them as "Wrestling Gold" bootleg videos.

KELLER: Jim Herd?

LAWLER: I only met him one time. They flew me down to Atlanta one time to talk to him about feeling out possible booking. They were doing the committee deal with Eddie Gilbert, Kevin Sullivan, Jim Ross, and several guys. I sat in on that and listened for a bit. Then Jim Herd and I went into his office. He basically talked to be about my philosophy on, on... sort of what we're talking about. I told him what I thought was right about his territory and what was wrong with the operation. He said "thanks" and I never heard from him again. So obviously we weren't on the same page.

KELLER: Looking at WCW now with them drawing the lowest crowds in their history, the door is open for a second promotion to compete with Titan. Do you think it will be WCW, or do you think Global or the UWF or USWA has a chance?

LAWLER: I don't think anybody will compete with them. Certainly not Global. We certainly won't. We're not interested. If more people were interested in doing their own thing rather than competing with somebody else, then there would be more successful operations around.

KELLER: Do you think if people did their own thing in their own territory that there could be another National Wrestling Alliance?

LAWLER: Oh, sure, absolutely, and it will come to that, eventually, and it's already happening. And Jerry Jarrett, that's one of the reasons he was willing to sell that syndicated package to Global, because he was losing stations at an alarming rate. So is WCW. And the reason for that is the ratings are down. And the oversaturation of wrestling is finally catching up. When wrestling is on everywhere, it's like if you've never had a t-bone steak, you could just imagine how good it would be if you had one for lunch, and then one for dinner, and then the next morning you got up and they said, "Here, have another one for breakfast." Then one for lunch, and one for dinner, and this went on for six months, pretty soon you wouldn't care if you never saw another t-bone steak in your life. And that's what's happened for wrestling.

What that opens the door for is that a lot of these stations will kick off the shows that are getting the bad stations. It's already here in Nashville. They've already kicked off the WWF on two stations up there and WCW off one. And here in Memphis, they kicked WCW off two stations they were on. They were getting, like, a "1" rating. So, when that happens, what you will see, as long as we can hang on here in Memphis with keeping our high ratings on our local show, is we'll be here when all the rest are gone. Well, like our last ratings were like a 13, which is good, but half of what it was in '86 or the seventies. And Jim Herd sees those ratings and wanted to talk to Jerry Jarrett about booking and all that stuff.

One of the things about our TV show that I think is so unique; everybody has gone to the big auditorium show and thinks the studio show is a thing of the past. We've stuck to our live, enthusiastic, 150 people studio show and it's live and now it's the only one of its kind in the country. And it's so unique that it's good again. The people love it. You can watch TBS and it's so pathetically phony to see everybody in the audience sitting on their hands and they've got the crowd going wild. People are not that stupid. It's just ridiculous. When they have to go back and sweeten the sound and sweeten the crowd noise, I would rather stick with what we've got. I think what we've got just blows them away.

KELLER: Do you think it's realistic with the territories that a territory could compete given the WWF still exists. Are people going to still perceive the territory as a minor league or are they going to perceive the territory as a home town team? What would it take to break a minor league image?

LAWLER: What will happen is if the glut of professional wrestling finally does take its toll and all the stations kick them off as undesirable programming because it won't get ratings, then you'll go back to the territory being perceived as the major league because they'll be the only wrestlers that the people will see in their own city. That's when we were thriving the biggest. People used to think the wrestlers we had with us here on Saturday mornings were the only wrestlers around. They were the best, the only ones they saw. They didn't get to compare them to a Hulk Hogan or an Ultimate Warrior.

KELLER: Do you think that if fans were able to compare the territory's stars to the WWF if the WWF was still around, that would be a hurdle to jump?

LAWLER: Yeah, it would be in the way. However you looked at doing that, I don't think if people see somebody on television, whether it's local or national or whatever, the majority of people, and especially our kind of wrestling fans, they look at them all as equal stars. I guarantee you our top newsman in town - his name is Mason Granger, he's the top anchor man on the top-rated news show - if you stood him beside Tom Brokaw, probably more people would recognize Mason Granger and think he's the bigger star. They see him on TV probably more than Tom Brokaw.

KELLER: What are some of the biggest promoting miscues in history?

LAWLER: The first thing that comes to mind was the Von Erichs capitalizing on the deaths of their sons and making that promotional angle. To me, one of the wo things was the WWF capitalizing on the war wi Iraq. Black Sunday would have to be anoth one when Vince McMahon got on t SuperStation. I think Jim Crocket and Bill Wa selling were two. That is what really led almost the total demise of territories.

KELLER: What are some of the mo influential events that have taken place to sha the way wrestling is today?

LAWLER: I think The Road Warriors we one of the worst things to happen to profession wrestling. That was the first advent of t steroid-freak monster. It's just gotten to whe that is what the people expect wrestlers to be.

I guess the pay-per-views. I really wou have thought that was going to be a direction t future of wrestling was going to. Now I thi they've burned that out. I just think they jump in with too many too quick. I guess it w always be there. I thought it would be more li boxing where they'd do one or two a year. B now it's like there's at least one a month. I do think it will ever get to where they do the real big one anymore.

KELLER: Maybe Flair vs. Hogan is t only big one left?

LAWLER: No, no. That won't me nothin'. I don't think they would ever build Fl like that. Unless Flair does something rig away. If he's off TV six months, it will be a de issue. I just don't think Vince needs it. I do think he will do what he has to do - giving t NWA credibility and almost equ acknowledgment. For the match to me anything it would have to be our champi versus their champion, and for there to be a mystery to the match's outcome, he would ha to make Flair really credible, and I don't think wants to do that. I don't think he would want make any other organization seem like they're the same ballpark with them. It would be a gre angle, I just don't think he needs it that bad.

KELLER: Are there any changes over t last twenty years that if you could take back, y would take back?

LAWLER: For me, I feel really fortuna for my career. I've had national recognition a exposure and that sort of thing without having pay the price most have to pay. And to have s of a normal life and be home a lot and still g basically a lot of recognition. I've been real satisfied with my career. I started out, not from wrestling background, not from a wrestli family not with a lot of money. My family w basically lower-middle class. My father was factory worker. My father could neither read n write. He had a really poor upbringing and ju worked in a factory. To accomplish what I hav I feel really fortunate. My mother hat wrestling and hates for me to wrestle. I feel lucky, like I've never had to get a job. I think any athlete or anybody that does something like this - any sport or anything - it's like really you get paid to play a kid's game that you've done all your life. I would have paid them to let me wrestle. I think that's one of the things we lose sight of. There aren't many guys in the business like that anymore. Now most of the guys that get into the business are guys that say, "Hey, I can shoot some steroids and paint my face and make a lot of money from this business."

KELLER: They have no respect for the business?

LAWLER: Yeah. No respect for the business. They're not doing it because that's what they want to do it and I think that's what makes the difference in a really successful business no matter what he does. If you're doing something you really want to do and love to do, you're going to do a better job at it. If you're just doing it to make a paycheck, it's the syndrome our whole country's gotten into. Like I said before, you do as little as possible to get as much money as possible. That's another thing about guarantees in this business. I hate those. They're not good for anybody. Well, I guess they're okay for the boys when they're making that money. But in the long run, they're not. It's like the George Gulas thing. He thought it was a good thing when his dad was giving him everything, but it really was not good. It was doing him the biggest disservice of all. The guarantees are the same way. It takes the incentive away from guys. They know they're going to get their money no matter how much or how little they work. So then they just go out there and do as little as possible, get it over with as soon as possible, and get their check. Everyone suffers. The fans. The business.

As far as my career, I really can't look back and say, "I wish I had done this" or "I would have done this differently."

As far as the sport, the major thing that has had a negative effect was nationwide cable. Without that, none of this national stuff would have taken place.

KELLER: Looking at steroids, do you see it as possible at this point to promote without them?

LAWLER: Absolutely.

KELLER: Even if other promotions are using them?

LAWLER: Our problem right now is the people don't care what the guys look like. They want to follow the soap opera effect of it. They want to relate to a guy's personality and his life and follow his career. Our problem is the talent level is so bad, it's hard to find guys that can go on television where they have the charisma where people care about them. When you find somebody like that, they get gobbled up by the people who've got cable. It all goes back to the cable exposure. Almost everything. If there is one thing I would change about the business, it would be cable exposure.

As far as the steroids go, I think they make too big a deal about steroids. I really do. I'm not saying I condone them or that they're not bad or anything. I'm sure they are. But it's not a drug that you get addicted to. It's not a drug that's going to make you rob somebody's house to get more of them. It's not a drug that's going to make you go out and kill somebody because you don't know what you're doing. It's almost like smokin' or drinkin', you're only damaging yourself. So you can look at anything where too much of it can be harmful to ya'. It's like eating. Everybody's got to eat, but if you eat too much, it's going to be bad for ya'. So you're the one that's got to make the decision. If you eat too much, I don't care. It's not going to affect me. But you should know for you're own well being that you shouldn't eat too much. If a wrestler takes steroids, I don't think anybody should care as long as he knows the risks he's taking.

KELLER: What about the wrestling promoters, McMahon and Herd, who continually promote wrestlers to the top of their promotion and give the most money to the most muscular, massive of their wrestlers. Isn't that inherently telling people in order to get to the top, steroids would be a really good thing to do.

LAWLER: You know what, that is exactly right. You're right. And I'm talking without really sitting down and thinking about it. As I'm sitting here saying what I'm saying, I realize there is a lot more that goes into it if you really look at it. Just like what you're saying. I watched Lyle Alzado last night. Even in a sport like football, it does give those competitors while they're taking them an illegal advantage. It does make them stronger than the person next to them. There is no way the records of the high jump and the hurdles and speed will be broken unless the athletes are taking steroids. It just cannot be done through the human body through normal conditioning. So it does give them an illegal advantage, so it shouldn't be condoned even though they're only hurting themselves. Because it does give them an advantage over the person trying to do the right thing. You're right.

KELLER: You see a promoter who sits in his plush chair in a window office making money off all of these people who are killing themselves just to increase the measurement of their chests.

LAWLER: I worked Philadelphia last month and Rick Rude was there and said they absolutely fired him because he got off of steroids. He said he personally had a talk with Vince McMahon and he said, "Man I wish I had it on tape. Vince said, 'You need to get back on the juice.'" And he said, "Well, we're trying to have a baby." And he said, "Well, you need to do that sometime on your own time. You need to get back on the juice." And he said, "Well, I'm not going to do it right now. And he said, "Well, call me back when you do get on it, but right now you're fired."

> "So (steroids do) give (wrestlers) an illegal advantage, so it shouldn't be condoned even though they're only hurting themselves. Because it does give them an advantage over the person trying to do the right thing."

KELLER: Getting away from the steroid issue, how about wrestling journalism, looking at how Bill Apter's magazines have developed to the newspapers that are covering wrestling to the wrestling newsletters, what is your attitude on the whole spectrum in the way wrestling is covered. How do you think it should be covered?

LAWLER: Well, I think some of it can certainly be good, while I think some of it is detrimental. I picked up magazines and read stories where I was quoted saying things that I had never said or Bill never called me about them. And I always sort of thought the fans realized what was going on, but I've come to realize lately that they don't. I've had people come up to me and say, "I read that you said this." So they look on those things as pretty much factual. Fortunately, I think Bill Apter and those people do a pretty good job of not saying anything damaging in there. They keep it within the realm of believability to where I'm not calling him every week saying, come on, don't put something like that in there. So I think that those things, I don't have a problem with them.

KELLER: Do you consider them part of the business or a separate journalistic entity?

LAWLER: I consider it part of the business. As a matter of fact, they're sending down Bob Smith and he's going to be here over the weekend to shoot a lot of stuff and and we're going to shoot a little angle with him Saturday. As far as those guys go, okay.

Newspapers, it goes back to that thing with the Nashville Network. It's all personal preference. What gets me so irritated, the one I'm most familiar with here in Memphis, of course, is the *Commercial Appeal*. We have no pro sports team in town. We have the World Basketball League. It's a struggling franchise. We've had in the past soccer teams, ice hockey teams. But anyway, the Rockers (basketball team) played basketball Monday night at the

Coliseum. We wrestled at the Pipkin Building. The Memphis Chicks were in the same complex playing baseball, that's our Double-A team. We had about 2500 people, a turn away crowd at the Pipkin Building. The Memphis Chicks had 900 people and the Rockers drew 450 people. And the next day in the paper they had like a half a page on the Rockers with pictures and a half page on the Chicks with pictures, and naturally absolutely nothing about wrestling except the little bitty small print results that we have to phone in or they wouldn't get them.

What gets you is, face facts, only 450 people cared enough about the Rockers to go see them and that is proportionate to the population. The same proportion of people would be interested in reading about them. The Chicks had 900 and we had a 2500 turnaway crowd at wrestling. Thought same amount of people would like to pick up the paper and see something about it in the paper. But they won't cover it because "it's not a sport." I don't have a good relationship with newspapers. The only time we get something in the paper here is if it is a knock.

KELLER: How about newsletters, such as Dave Meltzer's Observer *and the whole crop of others of differing styles and qualities that have followed?*

LAWLER: I think they are very detrimental to the wrestling business. I like to read them. But I'm in the business. I think it would be a great thing if it never got out to fans. But unfortunately it does, and it gets out to people that really shouldn't and people that don't want to read it.

I went to Evansville, Indiana one night and this guy, some guy with long brown hair, he does a newsletter on cassette, he's got four or five copies of the *Observer* and he's passing it around ringside and letting everybody read them. Stuff like that, it kills ya'. Here they read Eric Embry's the booker. I had a girl tell me last week, "Eric Embry's the boss in here." I said, "What are you talking about?" "Well, this guy gave me a paper that said Eric Embry's the booker and that he told everybody what to do." These are people that used to buy tickets and be wrestling fans. It's akin to telling kids there's no Santa Claus. Why does he do it? I guess it's profitable business for him. But if it kills the goose that laid the golden egg, then there's nothing to write about.

KELLER: Do you believe that the people who read the Observer *thus lose interest in wrestling?*

LAWLER: Absolutely, a lot of them do.

KELLER: Do you believe there is a place for publications like that as sort of a trade journal? Or, since Bill Apter is part of the business and not a journalist under the normal definition, then what kind of journalism would you like to see in wrestling?

LAWLER: Everybody knows everybody else's business in wrestling. There's seldom something in the *Wrestling Observer* that I don't already know. There's just stuff in there that the fans don't know. He gets all his information from the guys in the business, so the guys in the business know all that stuff, so it really doesn't serve a purpose. And once again, it goes back to the personal opinions of the people that write them. I don't know if you're familiar with *Matwatch*, but he's a big buddy with Joe Pedicino, so all of a sudden he writes that Joe Pedicino is going to be the next savior of wrestling and that Cornette's the greatest mind in wrestling history. I mean, there are some people that believe anything they see in black and white.

BILL APTER

So then these people write these things, and geez, I don't think they serve any useful purpose to the wrestling business itself.

KELLER: What would be your reaction to a magazine that told the truth and told the politics and behind the scenes stuff?

LAWLER: What purpose would that serve?

KELLER: In a capitalistic society telling the truth might work and...

LAWLER: It might make the guy making the magazine a lot of money. If you could put a camera in ladies bathrooms and sell the videotapes that would make whoever did that money.

KELLER: Okay, final question: If you had all the money in the world you needed to fund a new promotion in a virgin territory and the sole purpose was to make the most money, what would its characterizations be: Would it be national? Would it stress gimmicks or wrestling? Would it stress main event matches on TV or prelims in a studio? Would you use cable or syndication or both? Would your champion be a kid's idol or a despicable bad guy or a neutral spectacular wrestler?

LAWLER: Like I would be forced to do this?

KELLER: (laughs) Yeah, let's say you're forced to do it.

LAWLER: (laughs) Believe me, if I had all the money in the world, the last thing I would want to do is start a wrestling company.

KELLER: But the only way to spend this money is on pro wrestling and the only way to make any money is from this promotion.

LAWLER: (laughs) In other words, I hav access to somebody else's money, but in order make money from it, I have to make th company profitable.

KELLER: Correct.

LAWLER: I tell ya', I think it would just b really, really tough because the face wrestlin has changed too much. It's hard to say. I don know if you could compete with Vinc McMahon by doing the exact same thing tha he's doing. It's like the World Football Leagu or the USWA, they're coming in and doing th exact same thing the NFL is doing. It's lik we've already seen this. And if you went in an tried to do the same thing Vince is doing, I thin the people would say, "We already got all of tha we need." So I don't think that was the way I go.

KELLER: Even if it was a virgin territor never before exposed to wrestling?

LAWLER: Oh, okay. Then I would go wit the natural progression of things. I would no start out with any gimmicks at all. I would star out that way. If you want to have any longevity I would - well, if you just wanted to make as bi an impact as possible off the bat, then sure, yo bring a freak show to town, with guys wit painted faces and shoot up with steroids an bring in a circus and people go, "Damn, th circus is here." But if you just want somethin that will be in business for a long time and ge better and better, then I would go with the natura progression and start with no gimmicks, sort o like the Japanese. But eventually down the road whether it was a year or ten years, you woul probably end up with a circus.

KELLER: Why do you think you would hav to progress to that?

LAWLER: I think that is just the way society is. I think people want more and there's an insatiable appetite for that. In Japan, you see, their society is so far behind us, their society is just now beginning to catch up to us, and that's why they've been able to get away with what they have for this length of time. They will need more and bigger gimmicks constantly and I think they will eventually get to the point where we are and surpass us. Everything's faster in Japan. They do things quicker. I think that will happen. Their young people, they have progressed in five or ten years to where our young people are today. Their teenagers now are just like our teenagers, but five or ten years ago, their teenagers were nothing like our teenagers. They were probably very respectful and very calm and laid back and quiet. And in that length of time, they're just like we are now. And I think five years from now they'll be worse than us.

KELLER: Any questions I didn't ask that you wish I had?

LAWLER: (laughs) No, we wrote a book here today.

TORCH TALK

BRUNO SAMMARTINO

Bruno Sammartino was unquestionably the main attraction of the World Wide Wrestling Federation for most of the 60s and 70s. He retired from full-time active wrestling in 1981 and a few years later became the color commentator on the World Wrestling Federation's "Superstars of Wrestling" broadcasts with Vince McMahon. In the years he spent as color commentator, his frustration grew concerning the direction pro wrestling was taking. Finally, he disassociated himself with the WWF and began to speak out against what it had become and what Vince McMahon Jr. had done to pro wrestling. In the following "Torch Talk" interview, Bruno Sammartino, now 56, expresses his strong feelings about the evolution of pro wrestling over the last thirty years.

WADE KELLER: What led to your involvement in pro wrestling?

BRUNO SAMMARTINO: When I first came to the United States from Europe at age 15, I was always interested in professional wrestling and I started training right after I got here. When I was in high school, we had no wrestling team, but I went to the University of Pittsburgh because one of my gym teachers at school was friends with the wrestling coach and he arranged for me to go up there. So throughout high school, even though we didn't have a wrestling team, I used to walk from my high school to the Pitts Field House. And that's where I trained, usually on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday I would be up at the "Y" pumping iron. I did that for years until finally in 1959 I had the opportunity after being in a weight lifting contest. The late Bob Prince, who used to be the voice of the Pittsburgh Pirates, had a TV show on CBS Channel 2 KTKA here in Pittsburgh. I had appeared on his show several times. This time I was on I was talking about a particular weight lifting contest that I had just won and he knew of my interest in wrestling. He asked me if I was still working on the mat and I said yes. So a wrestling promoter by the name of Rudy Miller who was representing Capital Wrestling, which now is the WWF, was watching this show because there was a show here in Pittsburgh. After he saw that interview, he started inquiring around to see if anybody knew me and it turned out that one of the seconds at the studio wrestling that they used to have in Pittsburgh went to high school with me and he told them about me. And they contacted me and I met with Rudy Miller. A couple weeks later they flew me to Washington to look me over, see me work out a bit, and next thing I knew, a month or two later, I had my first professional match in 1959.

KELLER: Did you see pro wrestling before you came to the States?

SAMMARTINO: No. I first saw it here.

KELLER: What are some of your earliest memories as a fan of wrestlers who struck your interest?

SAMMARTINO: There were a lot of people, although not one person in particular. Like Argentina Rocca, Lou Thesz, Verne Gagne, Ruffy Silverstein, Buddy Rogers whom I later wrestled, Gene Stanley, Killer Kowalski, and Gorgeous George was wrestling in those days. I was fascinated by them all.

KELLER: As wrestling has progressed over your career and since you retired, there have been a lot of promoting styles. From your experience, which promoters do you believe did the best job promoting in the sixties and seventies when you were wrestling?

SAMMARTINO: Well, I wrestled for some different promotions, but my main one was Vince McMahon Sr. Some other promoters I wrestled for were Paul Boesch, Frank Tunney in Toronto, and Sam Muchnick in St. Louis. I went to other territories for matches, but I can't say I knew them well, like Nick Gulas when I wrestled in Tennessee or LaBell in Los Angeles or Roy Shire. I ran into a lot of different promoters, but to say how well I knew them or how different they were, I think basically that the times I was in business from `59 until when I got out in `81, I would say basically wrestling was wrestling. I don't think there was a world of difference from any of the different promotions around the country.

KELLER: What was it about wrestling in those days that sparked people's interest in becoming fans of wrestling in addition to or instead of, say, baseball or football?

SAMMARTINO: I think first of all, with the percentage of people, youth coming up, you've got a certain percentage of them with different interests in different sports. As far as wrestling in those days, I think because it was televised, I think a lot of the kids got interested because of some of the people that they saw and liked and wished to be like. Then they would start working out toward reaching those goals. I would like to think wrestling back then had a certain amount of showmanship and gimmicks, if you will, but certainly it impressed people with appreciating participants' athletic and wrestling skills. I think that there were always a certain number of people who were attracted to pro wrestling, just like baseball, football, or any other sport.

KELLER: Do you think there were things that could have been done that would have made wrestling more successful or bigger even when times were good during your days wrestling?

SAMMARTINO: I think that wrestling in those days was a lot more popular than people of today have any idea. A lot of people think wrestling today is bigger than it's ever been. That's absolutely erroneous because when I look back over my career, my whole experience in the business, I remember for example where I wrestled mostly in the Northeast, but if Vince McMahon Sr. would loan me out to Los Angeles or Tennessee or Florida or Texas or wherever I went, they were all different - what we called - territories. Sure there might have been periods where one territory didn't do as well, but overall the business in general was doing mostly great everywhere else. It might have been slow in Detroit or Texas, but let's say if Texas was down, then the Northeast and Minnesota and all over the Midwest were doing great. So, my point is, overall throughout the country wrestling was flourishing well, it was very healthy.

How could it have been bigger? I don't know. It depends on what one might consider "bigger." If you're talking about more national exposure, that might not have necessarily made it bigger. The proof of that is now. They have national exposure - WWF, WCW - but if you look at wrestling as a whole, you compare the

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BRUNO SAMMARTINO

gates of when I was wrestling to now, you will see it is not nearly as popular is it used to be.

KELLER: When you look at the eighties, and especially Vince McMahon Jr.'s expansion, do you look upon what he did as good or bad for the wrestling business?

SAMMARTINO: Oh, I look at it as destroying the business and I'll tell you why. Because when I look back prior to when he took over, for example, in 1984 when he came onto the scene, when you look at wrestling from 1984 on, sure, when he started all of his national promoting and rock and wrestling and bringing in the showbiz characters like Cydni Laupre and Mr. T, a lot of people at that time could have argued, "Hey, wrestling has never had so much attention. Wow, look at all this exposure it's getting." But as I warned some people in the business at that time, this is a fad, this will not last. Because what is going on, it is bringing attention to a lot of new people who may not have been wrestling fans before. But the real wrestling fans who we see week after week and year after year, these kinds of fans might get turned off by this and we'll see less and less of them until they start to disappear. I don't want to be the one to say, "I told you so," but some people had criticized me and said that I was of a yesteryear mentality and that I wasn't willing to accept the now and future. Well, I told some people to watch down the road in a few years to see if that is correct. There are a lot of people I don't feel know the business very well who have this idea that the business got so big when McMahon started this in 1984 and that it's remained exceptionally huge up until now. Yes, in 1984 when he started on this stuff and by 1985 it was big, but come 1986, I was there, and I started to see the decline. Except the decline was so great that McMahon asked me - who in wrestling years was very old - if I would put on the tights to see if I could bring back arenas, like Boston which was down, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and I did. I actually put on the tights. When I worked these shows, they had close to sell-outs or sell-outs, and you can check that. This is not bragging or exaggerating. What it is, is I'm not trying to show the magic of Bruno Sammartino. I'm trying to show that what McMahon created was dying a fast death and when Bruno Sammartino had worked all these years, he was able to bring back for a show or two the fans who were driven away.

KELLER: Do you think there would have been a way for Vince to attract the fans he ended up attracting - the yuppie or trendy crowd - while not alienating the fans who were supporting him to begin with?

SAMMARTINO: Boy, that's a hard question because I don't know. Here's the best answer I can give you for that. If we used to sell out, and we did, well... Where are you from?

KELLER: Minneapolis.

SAMMARTINO: Sure, Minneapolis. There's a good example. If you're old enough to remember the days of Verne Gagne's promotion, he basically had a very healthy organization over there. In New York and the Northeast, I'm not trying to brag, but I sold out Madison Square Garden on a regular basis, as well as Boston and Philadelphia and Washington and Baltimore. If we didn't sell out every time - I promise you we did not - but the gates were pretty darn close. Here's my point. Why, when you're doing near capacity business, why bother to see if you can make changes to bring in the yuppies and maintain these fans? Where would you put them, anyway?

KELLER: Maybe he wasn't, in attracting these new fans, trying to fill the arenas into the aisles, but was instead trying to get on NBC and maybe get into - well, I don't know if he forsaw pay-per-view at that time - but maybe closed circuit?

SAMMARTINO: But what good is it in the long run? Look at it in the long run. The arenas have died, they're not drawing well anywhere. Now if they draw a half a house, that's a big deal and there's a party. In my day, I was in danger of being fired. I wasn't doing the job. I wasn't bringing in the people.

Continuing on with NBC, fine, they did get on NBC, which we didn't, but NBC got rid o them, so how long did it last? Five years? Is tha a long time when you look at the history o wrestling? Five years is nothing. Boom, they'r gone now. Pay-per-view, yes, there's n question they made money on pay-per-view, bu look at when they first got into pay-per-view which was relatively a short time ago, you loo at it today, you can see they're doing a fraction o the buyrate that they did at first.

The whole point this proves - at least i proves to me - that this all new thing the WW came up with is a failure, because if it was successful way to go, after six or seven years i should be getting bigger, not dying out.

KELLER: Do you believe, though, that th expansion from territories to nationa promotions was an inevitability due to cabl television or do you think territories could hav stayed around even with cable's existence?

SAMMARTINO: Absolutely they coul have stayed around. This started out years ago When I was still wrestling on a regular basis Madison Square Garden wrestling was bein picked up on around the country. That didn' hurt anybody. It didn't hurt anything anyplace In fact, if promoters had cooperated with on another, through cable they could get exposur from one another. If anything that would hav helped in that people from the New York are may want to see Ray Stevens from California So they could bring in Bruno Sammartino to sel out San Francisco and could bring somebod from Texas up here to help draw on a regula basis. And that stuff was going on to a certai degree, and if anything, that was healthy. Tha was not a detriment to the business. What' going on now, the reason it's a detriment to th business, is you might call it just one territory The WWF goes everywhere. So what do you se now as far as doing it like that? What do you se as far as new faces? Because somebody come over from WCW and comes to the WWF, that' not a new face. They're both nationwide. S there is no blood pumped into either one of thes organizations. The Road Warriors leave the and come here and become The Legion o Doom. Or Windham and Rotunda go to th WWF and then WCW and then back, o whatever. It's a back and forth switch, but it's th same people in the same cities all the time.

KELLER: Do you think that a reaction fro the national expansion has been the need t create new characterizations for wrestlers whe they switch promotions since they are not new a in a new wrestler from another territory? Or d you think it was Vince's plan going in that he wa going to create more outrageous character whether there were fresh wrestlers available o not?

SAMMARTINO: I think McMahon ha created more characters, but who knows abo McMahon. If you knew McMahon, who coul ever figure out McMahon or what he might b thinking. I always thought of him as a ver bizarre individual all the years I ever knew hi I think he thought he could create characte when he wanted to get into merchandisin certain cartoon characters that would appeal t

"Wrestling will keep dying. Make no mistake. Wrestling is dying each day. It's dying a little bit more. The greatest thing that could happen to professional wrestling for it to resurrect someday is for McMahon and even the Ted Turner group, these kind of people have to be out of the business completely."

the kids, and at the same time maybe he thought that mom and dad would continue their interest. But you can't have it both ways. It's very obvious, at least it is to me, that moms and dads look at wrestling as a cartoon show for their kids. And they're telling their kids, "Yeah, watch it on TV. But why spend money at the arena to see a show you can see on TV each week."

My experience from people I run into, they look at wrestling as a joke. They tell me, and maybe they're being nice to my face, I don't know, they tell me," "Bruno, we used to watch you, boy that was wrestling. We really loved it. But my god, what's happened to it?" Then they laugh. This is what I hear all the time. That tells me how turned off people are with what McMahon has done.

KELLER: How do you think the NWA and now WCW have done to counteract and be a number two promotion?

SAMMARTINO: I think they screwed up really bad and I'll tell ya' why. At least I believe that. WCW or NWA or whatever you want to call them, should have maintained their tradition of wrestling as they had for many, many years, when Jim Crockett sold to Ted Turner. When Turner hired all these non-wrestling people to head the organization, that's when they got into serious trouble. What I think happened is they saw McMahon's way and they thought since at the beginning McMahon was experiencing good success, that was the way to go. But we don't want to look like copycats, so we'll find our own format but essentially do the same things. So as they did that, they lost as much credibility as the WWF. The people I talk to, they look at the WWF as bizarre and WCW as copycats of the WWF. As a result, I think they've destroyed themselves. The tragedy there is that I believe they have some tremendous talent, and had they stayed on their own and not copied the WWF, but kept maintaining the tradition of NWA and wrestling, I believe that as wrestling became more and more bizarre in the minds of those fans, I think you would have had more people switching to the NWA. But the NWA, instead of keeping their tradition and allowing fans to do that, they chased away their fans as well.

KELLER: Why then did Verne Gagne fail, for example, as he fought the gimmickry a little bit? Was it just the funding or what?

SAMMARTINO: He failed because first of all, what Verne did was this. I could be wrong here, you're asking me a question and I'm giving you my answer. Maybe Verne would not even appreciate it, but I'm telling you what I really believe. When the WWF and WCW were getting their TV nationwide and expanding all over, they came to Verne's part of the country as well. Vince McMahon hooked up a lot of talent, the NWA hooked up a lot of talent, and they started running shows right against Verne in Verne's backyard. That in itself is enough to destroy anybody. Verne, on the other hand, I don't think went all out of his way to calm that by maintaining some top notch people that he might have kept under contract to keep in his stable so he didn't become weak in the kind of talent he had and try to fight back the two massive organizations that held up so much of the talent. Even then, in all honesty, I don't know if that would have worked because history tells us - for instance, my city here is Pittsburgh, and if I'm running shows and if somebody from New York comes and promotes a show here and then someone comes in from North Carolina and promotes a show here, there's too much of it and people lose interest in it. So for Verne, people lost interest because the WWF and the NWA were coming in there. The combination of all these things have killed that area and killed many other areas around the country.

KELLER: Do you believe there is a place for the highly colorful, characterized wrestling with little or no stress on actual workrate of the wrestlers as long as there is an alternative group providing action for fans of actual wrestling?

SAMMARTINO: Maybe. There probably could be. But if there was an organization still promoting like the WWF does nationally, that is enough to turn people away from the game in general. If there were territories, if the WWF stayed in the Northeast and were bizarre and did whatever they wanted, if they didn't interfere with the Carolinas and Florida and Tennessee and Minnesota, then fine, it would have been the Northeast that died.

KELLER: Do you see a place for a minimal amount of cartoonism in a promotion for the kids as long as it is low in the card?

SAMMARTINO: No, because people in general judge the whole thing. I don't buy that theory at all. You just can 't have it both ways. It won't work.

KELLER: How about looking at the way Japan is promoted, without gimmickry for the most part with the heavy stress on wrestling and it's so successful.

SAMMARTINO: The reason why Japan is healthy - I started going to Japan in 1965. Last year they had me over there as a guest because it was Baba's 30th Anniversary as a promoter. They flew me over there. I only went to about three of their shows. Basically, I finished my career there in 1981. Here's the thing. What I basically saw in my short visit there was the same nonsense, ridiculous, bizarreness. I saw wrestlers. I see wrestlers. I didn't see steroid freaks. I saw, just like 20 or 30 years ago, the same kind of guys that displayed a lot of wrestling. The kind like Tiger Mask are a rarity and they can back up their gimmick. Just like we had it years ago. We had gimmicks. Personally I was always anti-gimmick. Right or wrong, that's the way I felt. But we had a certain amount of gimmickry. But look, who were the big stars in this country? Lou Thesz, Verne Gagne, Killer Kowalski, Bill O'Connor. You could go on with a long list of people. How many people that had bad gimmicks when you look back, can you say, "Boy, they were really big for a really long time?" There is only one guy through the 40s and early 50s, and that was Gorgeous George, because he was the first. But even he, if you followed Gorgeous George, as popular as George was, he did not last as many years as a lot of people think he did as a headliner.

KELLER: Wasn't that self-destruction on his part, in a way?

SAMMARTINO: But you see my point, that's how Japan is. Whatever gimmicks we had in our country, they weren't what you'd think of as headliners. In Japan, they're not the headliners.

KELLER: Given Vince Jr.'s going to continue to go up and down with his success, but continue promoting in his current style, do you think another promotion can be tremendously successful as an alternative group?

SAMMARTINO: No. Wrestling will keep dying. Make no mistake. Wrestling is dying each day. It's dying a little bit more. The greatest thing that could happen to professional wrestling for it to resurrect someday is for McMahon and even the Ted Turner group, these kind of people have to be out of the business completely. Because when you get these people and their mentality out of the business entirely, it would be best for a few years for no big promotions to pop up, let things cool off, let everything really cool off. Then let some people with some wrestling minds get back into the area of territories style. Get back to the basics with some good athletes who can give you some good action that people can love and appreciate. Even then it won't be successful, but as time goes by, people will get this present McMahon stuff out of their minds, and slowly come to appreciate a little more of what has come before them and not seeing this garbage and distractions. No matter where you look, in any territory, it's going to take time, but that's the only salvation. Because years ago when we called the death of a territory was when someone got bizarre and used crazy things like The Sheik did in Michigan. Eventually that died. What happened when a territory died? Wrestling went on great because there were something like 30 territories that were still going strong and healthy. Detroit was left dead for a couple of years because it wasn't important that it thrived when there were 30 some other territories still surviving for the wrestlers to work. When it was left alone long enough, some other promoter would say, "I'm going to start promoting Michigan again." Before you knew it, he had TV, started bringing in some talent, and promoters would lend him some top names, and before you knew it, that place came back up again.

KELLER: Looking at the people who run the cable networks, be it Ted Turner at TBS, the USA people, and ESPN, pro wrestling is and always will be relatively cheap programming. Do you think that will be a stumbling block to re-establishing the territories as opposed to being national?

SAMMARTINO: First of all, when you talk about some of these national things, such as NBC, that was national. But you see it died. Some of these national things that you mentioned, I see them dying out, too. What you go back to is local promotions with local talent. The longer the McMahons are in the business, in my view, the longer it will take wrestling to come back.

KELLER: When you look at what Vince Jr. did, how much of an influence in his long term gameplan do you think Vince Sr. had?

SAMMARTINO: I believe Vince McMahon Sr. died a very angry and sad and miserable man because he so despised what his son was doing.

KELLER: Do you believe he tried to stop what his son was doing?

SAMMARTINO: His health deteriorated. At that time, he and I were not on the best of terms, so I can only tell you what I was told. I was told when he was in Florida sick at home, he would call the taping and he was so bothered because he was getting calls from other promoters saying, "What the hell is your son doing, invading our territories!" McMahon would call and try to talk to his kid and his son didn't want to hear his father's complaints.

KELLER: When you were doing color commentary for the WWF, was your input invited by McMahon Jr.?

SAMMARTINO: When McMahon Jr. called me after his father died, I was led to believe that who better than Bruno Sammartino who had been around for so many years to come in and lend a hand in keeping the WWF going. At least I was under that impression. When I came back in 1984, I started seeing these changes and he never asked for my opinion on anything. So it was obvious at that time he probably wanted me back for my name and reputation with that organization for all those years.

KELLER: But not to lend insight?

SAMMARTINO: Correct. And as time went on and I saw how ridiculous it was becoming, I wanted to get the hell out. The reason I didn't get out sooner was that my kid was involved. And my kid who unfortunately - because I never wanted him to get into the game - found out that maybe he was going to get a break and because of that, if I quit now, what would the effect be on him. Even with all those things, I reached the point where I said, "I can't stay here. I'm embarassed by what's going on. I hate it. I cannot stay here. I have to leave." And I finally left.

KELLER: In the years you wrestled and since then, what do you believe have been some of the biggest promoting miscues in history?

SAMMARTINO: I don't know. From my own personal experience, the only thing I've been critical of was what I think helped bring WCW down. Unfortunately, a lot of the modern day people would disagree with me. Let me talk about the NWA, because that's what they were at the time, not WCW. They were healthy, I thought they were strong. But when Jim Crockett Sr. died and Jim Crockett Jr. took over, there was a difference between the two. Jim Crockett Sr. understood the game. He was overseeing what his bookers did, and when he saw something that he thought was a detriment to wrestling, he would bring someone else in. When Junior took over, that's when things changed, because Junior did not understand the business like Senior did. If you remember when he hired Dusty Rhodes, a lot of people agree, that's when he destroyed that organization. I want to tell you how Dusty Rhodes destroyed it. Dusty Rhodes started doing very bizarre things, which in the old days we used to call shotgunning a territory. Shotgunning meaning when they would do all sorts of bizarre angles on television like The Sheik in Detroit and at the arenas where people would go, "Bullcrap," and get turned away. Before you knew it, nobody would like it and nobody would go. He started doing these scaffold matches, triple ring matches. A lot of people gave him a lot of credit because they said these things were really drawing. It always works when you first do them; they draw. But after a while, they kill you, because number one, what do you follow all that nonsense with? Not only what do you follow it with, after people saw it and saw the follow-ups, what did they think of it? And people started to see it as a bunch of bizarre garbage, a bunch of bizarre nonsense. And then the promotions, when the territory or the towns declined, thought they needed to do more bizarre things. That's the beginning of the end. Things got so old after that and Rhodes was still the booker and that's when Crockett, if you followed that situation, started running into financial difficulties. Rhodes was still the booker! He was still the man there. When Crockett sold to Turner, evidently somebody told Turner's people, "Look, the NWA's in a situation here because of what he's done."

The problem was, whoever they hired after that, they expected miracles and miracles just don't happen like that. They thought by firing Rhodes, that somebody else would come in with a different mentality and turn things around. But unfortunately when you do damage like was done over there, there is no miracle worker. What brings it back if you have a chance to bri
it back, is by turning things around by doing tl
right things, by then having a lot of patience ar
a lot of money to invest until you finally sho
the fans of that particular territory or the NW
that there is a change and they are back in
wrestling. It may be a year or longer before fa
would see the consistency of it all when the fai
would return. Unfortunately, they wouldn't ha
the patience for that. So what would they d
Hire one guy and then things didn't work o
after six weeks. The next guy came in ar
thought, "They fired so and so, so I better t
something really different."

*KELLER: Who do you believe would ha
been or still would be a good person for WCW
give a full year or more as booker? Bill Wat
Eddie Gilbert, you, Terry Funk, The Gagnes?*

SAMMARTINO: With me, well, I do
know if you realize it or not, but all the time
was wrestling with the WWF, I was mainly tl
guy who did all the thinking as far as the ma
events with the major events I was involv
with. I was very successful, and that's n
bragging, I'm telling you the truth. The reas
was, here was my theory. For television, y
produce a good show. You don't give it
angles, no gimmicks, except maybe once a ye
or so. Because if once a year or so somethi
happens in TV, it will catch on like fire. Oka
What I believed in was then to go to the arer
give the people one heck of a match, one heck
a show. I never believed for example... Let n
explain it to you this way. If I wrestled
Madison Square Garden, I never believed
giving 14 or 15 matches. I believed in 6 or
matches. I never believed in giving all ma
event type matches. I believed in giving a fe
strictly preliminary matches. The fourth a lit
bit better, then the fifth better, the sixth the sen
final, and the final match was the one the peop
paid to see. The matches underneath kept t
people pleased, they appreciated them. But yo
main event better be good. And if there's goi
to be a return match, it better be a return mat
people can't wait until next month to come ba
to see. That was my mentality.

Then summertime is a slow business time
professional wrestling in the Northeast. Co
March, because the biggest wrestling audien
was in the winter months, and becau
Summertime was a little slow for us, wha
believed was in March, when you had t
audience, that's when you did something rea
exciting, like if you remember the Zbysz
thing. But we did it in March. Why would I d
in March? Because we had the big audience a
now that you did something like that, you'
captivated them so now they have to stay with
So all summer long they would follow tl
match. In Boston, they were waiting for tl
match. All summer long we set records whe
was supposed to be slow times. Now you s
guys run in the ring and bash somebody over t
head with a chair every week. It all becon
meaningless.

If I was in charge of WCW, I would go ba
with that mentality. I would clean up the T
situation, I would clean up a lot of the charact
and their ways, and I would go back to are

wrestling the way it should be with the proper cards. You run the big shows and the secondary shows. The secondary shows made the promotion bucks. They had me wrestling eight times a week. I told McMahon I could only be at one place at once. I used to tell him to load up the other card because I was the champion and the focus of the organization. If I had a good opponent, the only thing necessary was a respectable card, so people wouldn't be bored stiff during the rest of the card. That's the mentality I would go back to.

I don't care how people want to believe time has changed things and all that. Baloney! Nobody has proven to me that the new mentality is worth two cents because in the short time this new mentality has been here, the business is in horrible shape.

KELLER: How would you combat that. Let's say you're running WCW. How would you deal with the dilemma of having to produce six original hours of TV a week?

SAMMARTINO: I wouldn't do that. I would get away from running TV nationwide. I would concentrate in what was once the NWA territory. To hell with the rest of it. Don't try to conquer the world. I would try to capture my territory, and if other areas wanted to borrow my talent at times, I would let them if it would help their territory in a down time. Then I would clean up all of the garbage and get back to hard, hard work.

KELLER: How are you going to deal with the current attitude of a lot of fans that bigger is not only better, but bigger is necessary?

SAMMARTINO: For one thing, if you know anything about me at all, anybody that I even suspected touched that stuff would never be involved in my organization. That's how I am when it comes to all of that garbage. As far as them telling me that stuff is necessary, well, I ask them how is it helping them draw now. They're not drawing crowds with steroids. You know what they're doing now to make the houses look bigger? They're papering. I almost died when a friend told me, "Bruno, you go to a grocery store and buy $10 worth of groceries and they give you two tickets to Madison Square Garden." So somebody's going to try to argue that you need these characters. Where is the tremendous amount of success they are providing you?

KELLER: How do you recommend other promoters eliminate them when it is nearly impossible to test someone who is educated on how to beat tests?

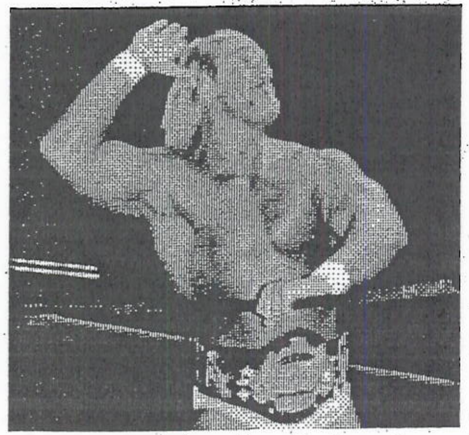
> "I'm not coming on so strong because (Hulk Hogan) called me a hypocrite. It was so pathetic on his part to mention me. How can he call me a hypocrite for wrestling Billy Graham who was a steroid user. My god, he calls me a hypocrite and he's on television saying what he's saying. How bizarre can you be. What is this guy thinking."

SAMMARTINO: Look, let me tell you. Look at the Zahorian trial. This crap has been going on since the mid-seventies. When the guys were lined up to get their stuff, the McMahon's were watching. We all knew what was going on. No one was so naive that we didn't know. There was never an effort made that I know of to stop it. Can you test for it? I don't know. I'm told there is stuff to mask the stuff. As more sophisticated steroid testing comes out, so will more sophisticated steroids. First of all, I can tell when someone is on it. I'm not going to tell you it's the simplest thing in the world. I am telling you I could do everything possible to eliminate that horrible crap.

Let me speak of me because I know me best. Look at me in the sixties when I was my biggest. I was a 275 pound gorilla. Later I dropped weight to 250 and 240 to save my back and be easier on my knees. My point, not to brag, is that if people want to look big is to be patient, train hard, and they can achieve size. I didn't look like a bodybuilder, I looked like a damn powerful wrestler.

KELLER: What do you think about the way Hulk Hogan has handled the publicity concerning steroids?

SAMMARTINO: He handled that like total garbage and I will tell you why I resent him bitterly. When I heard he was going to be on the Arsenio Hall Show, I heard he was going to come clean. I never believed that. But here's what I didn't believe. I thought he was going to say, "Years ago when I was a young guy coming up, I was told these steroids would help build me up. I was told there was no danger involved. I was a young guy and got on it. But as time went on, I learned more about it and found out that it could be detrimental to my health." That would have been a big lie, but at least it would have been a certain admission. So then say to the little Hulkamaniacs, "Listen to a guy who was on the stuff. I was on the stuff and I found out it is bad for ya'. So for god's sakes, don't go on it." I thought he was going to pull one of those stunts. It would have at least been some admission. But this jerk, this pathetic poor excuse of a human being to come on and say, "Hey, I never been on steroids. Only three times in 1983." And by the way, a doctor friend of mine laughed at his explanation of getting cut or taking steroids. That's the only time he claims he ever did it. Well, that was such an outrageous and pathetic and disgusting... if he was any kind of a man, don't go on at all. Stay the hell off TV and keep your mouth shut.



HULK HOGAN

I'm not coming on so strong because he called me a hypocrite. It was so pathetic on his part to mention me. How can he call me a hypocrite for wrestling Billy Graham who was a steroid user. My god, he calls me a hypocrite and he's on television saying what he's saying. How bizarre can you be. What is this guy thinking. As far as wrestling Graham, I knew he was on steroids, but was it my responsiblity for Graham's behavior. What he said was so stupid. If I'm a guy who's anti-steroids, I am supposed to insist that all my opponents are totally clean or be tested. I told Billy, "I don't know much about this stuff, but I hear there are some side effects." The effects weren't as well defined back then, not to take Billy off the hook or defend Billy for his mistakes.

KELLER: Who are some of the people you have come across in the wrestling business that you are just fond of?

SAMMARTINO: I never got too close to anybody. I'm only a loner. But there are people that I do respect. I always respected Killer Kowalski and one of the reasons was that he was always a very clean living human being. Always totally dedicated to the game. He was a machine in the ring. That guy was in great shape all the time. He was a villain, so people disliked his tactics, but I thought he was tremendous.

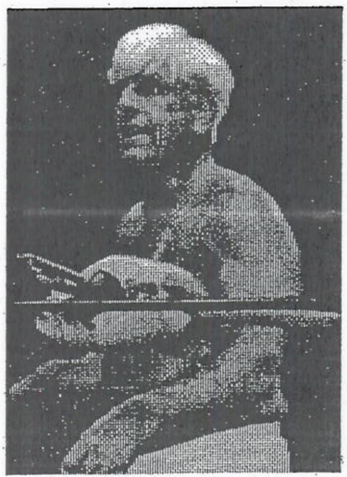
I respect Lou Thesz. I respect Verne Gagne. I respect Don Leo Jonathan. I respected Big Bill Miller, a veteran by trade. I liked Bill Watts and respected him. Sometimes he was a temperamental guy, but as far as in the game, I cannot remember him being a detriment to the business. He was outspoken, which I liked. I feel funny because I'm sure I'm leaving people out. There were a lot of people.

KELLER: Who are some of the people you don't respect so that you don't even mind publicly saying so?

SAMMARTINO: People that were not a credit to the business? In my era, in all honesty, there were people that I thought what they were doing was unhealthy for the business, but I don't think they were intentionally trying to hurt the business. Remember the Sheik in Detroit, I didn't care for him much because he didn't rely on wrestling. Jerry Graham, I thought he was a detriment. Today some of these people have drug problems. He had a booze problem. He behaved poorly because of that. The reason I resent more people today is because they're not in the business today for the love of wrestling. They're not in it to contribute their part, but to take away from it. It's just a great opportunity to make money without any concern for the damage they are doing. They are raping the business and they have no respect for it and are grabbing whatever they can. And when they're gone, they don't give a damn what they leave. In my day, there were a lot more contributions. This business was good to me. It was good to people before me. It was good to people after me. But these new people today are killing it for someone else tomorrow. I think, too, that anybody who can put a stop to some of the lying and negatives, they should help the business and try to stop what is going on. I think they owe it to the business for what the business has done for a lot of us.

LARRY ZBYSZKO

A lot of the stars today, when they get out of the business, will probably be the first to knock it and say it was just a cartoon show, and they're happy to be out of it. I had a legitimate love for the business and it's hard to see where it's headed. And as far as me being jealous of the big money some of the stars are making today, sure I never made one million dollars, but I was probably the top paid wrestler of my time and I wasn't one to make $300,000 and spend $400,000. So I don't need anybody to have a charity event for me. I was World Champion for over eleven years. What do I have to be jealous about? I would be embarassed to be in the business today.



"NATURE BOY" RIC FLAIR

KELLER: And you are healthy and a lot of wrestlers when they're your age... well, a lot of wrestlers may not make it to your age?

SAMMARTINO: I'm 55 years old and I get up and run six to eight miles in the morning and I do that five days a week. I still work out every day. I've had a lot of injuries. When I take my yearly physical, my doctors tell me I'm as healthy as a 25 year old guy. The point is I train, do all these things, and feel great.

KELLER: What do you think of Ric Flair, who is considered the greatest wrestler of this era?

SAMMARTINO: I like Ric because first of all, Ric is one of the guys today who if he needed to do an hour match, he could do it. I like that about the guy. The only negative thing I can say about Ric that I know you won't appreciate me saying, is a lot of people have said he may be the greatest performer ever. I resent that remark. I'm not comparing myself or anybody. There are people who throughout their career were what people would consider a good guy or a bad guy. I've seen some people that have made the changes. Thesz has done it. Here's the difference. Larry Zbyszko, another guy. Let's forget Thesz and talk modern, say Zbyszko. I helped Zbyszko in the business. Zbyszko was a clean wrestler. Zbyszko was a clean wrestler with what a lot of people said was a similar style to mine with the arm drags and drop toe holds and all that kind of stuff. What I'm getting at is that he was a babyface, a clean wrestler. He did everything a good guy was supposed to do in that day. Then he switched so he could do the thing with me. He became a very vicious, arrogant heel. What do I mean by that? There is no difference between The Road Warriors as good or bad. Ric Flair is great. But did you notice when Ric Flair switched? Did he throw armdrags and that kind of thing? No, he did the same thing he did as a villain, except he was always wrestling against a bad guy, so he was cheered and the heel was booed. But if you watched his style, it was the same as a bad guy as it was as a good guy. I could turn the clock back and show you good guys who had completely different styles as bad guys. That's what I call a real complete talent.

You know what made me last all these years, being a big attraction. When I was a rookie in the business, I watched Antonio Rocca. I would watch him and I noticed something that influenced my career. I noticed when he wrestled he would basically do the same moves every night. I saw that of Eduard Carpentier. I saw that and thought there's something wrong there. And as I learned more in the business in '59 to '61., by the time I got my break and became champion in 1963, not only had a learned, but I had paid a lot of attention as I wrestled in Canada for a year and a half for Tunney and I observed and observed and observed. I thought if I ever got a break, I thought the only way to stay an attraction, what I've got to do is be completely different from what I'm watching. If I'm wrestling different people, I wrestled their style. I adapted to my opponent's style so every match was different. If I met a highspot artist, I fought that style. If met a strongman, we had a strength match. If he was a brawler, we'd brawl. If he was a wrestler we wrestled. That was the secret to me. When broke my neck in 1976, I noticed a new breed of wrestlers coming up who were brawlers, the Bruiser Brodys and Stan Hansens. In those later moves I stuck more with the brawling because it was less dangerous to me. Stan Hansen broke my neck because, well I don't want to get into it but instead of giving me a regular bodyslam, he drove me right onto my head. A lot of people said to me who saw me near the end of my career, "You're critical of all these guys, but you were a brawler." Well, I was a brawler if you saw me towards the end of my career, but if you saw me toward the beginning of my career, you would see I was a lot of things.

KELLER: What do you think of Nick Bockwinkel?

SAMMARTINO: Very good! Nick was very good. Nick could give you wrestling, give you brawling, that's what I call a terrific performer. That's a terrific example.

KELLER: Do you believe Nick Bockwinkel was a better all-around wrestler than Flair?

SAMMARTINO: Yes, Flair might have been a more, say, spectacular wrestler. But if you talked about a complete performer, you would have to say Bockwinkel.

KELLER: Where does Backlund stand?

SAMMARTINO: Bob Backlund was colorless. Even though Bob was a good athlete, if you watched him he was almost stiff with his moves. He was not smooth-flowing. And I didn't think there was a lot of versatility to him. I'm not knocking him because I certainly prefered him to a lot of other wrestlers. But he wasn't the complete wrestler. I know Bob would feel hurt if he reads this, but I'm just being truthful. He lacked charisma. He was not charismatic at all.

KELLER: What about Harley Race?

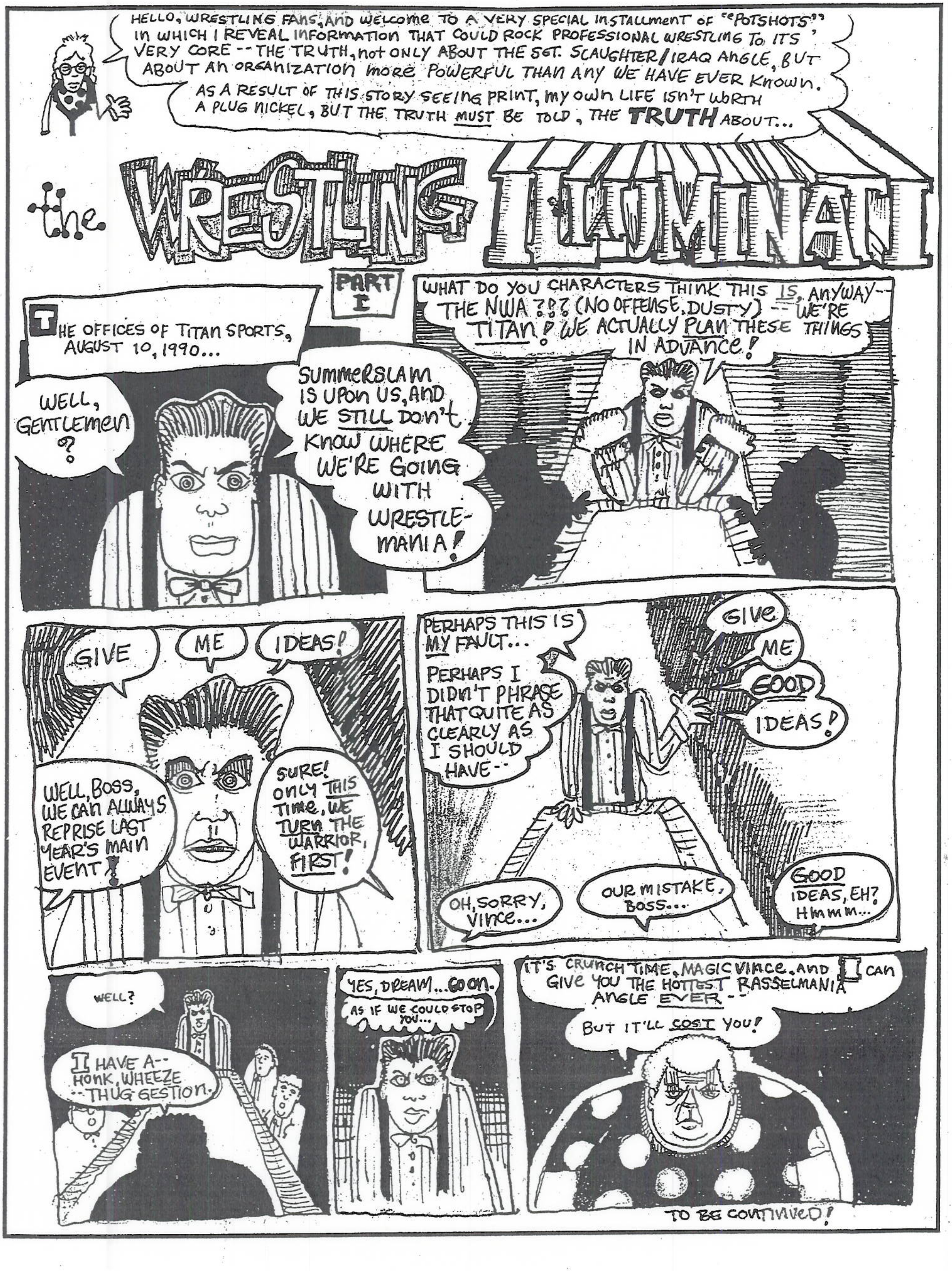
SAMMARTINO: Harley Race in his day wasn't the speediest man in the ring, but I thought he was a terrific wrestler, a good technician. I wrestled him a few times and I enjoyed it. He could do it all. It pained me to see him in the WWF and the way he was used. That should never happen to a guy with that kind of talent.

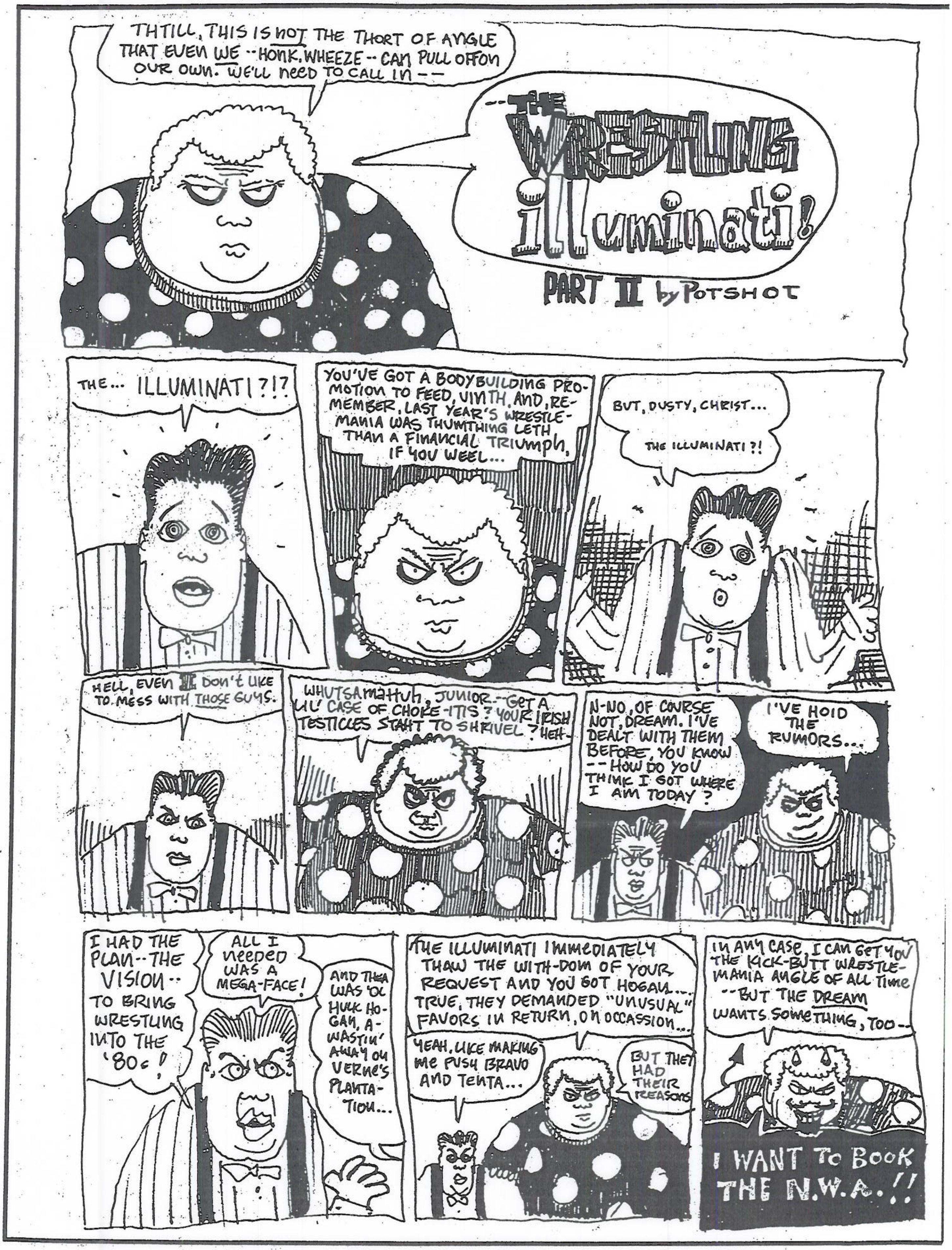
KELLER: How about Verne Gagne?

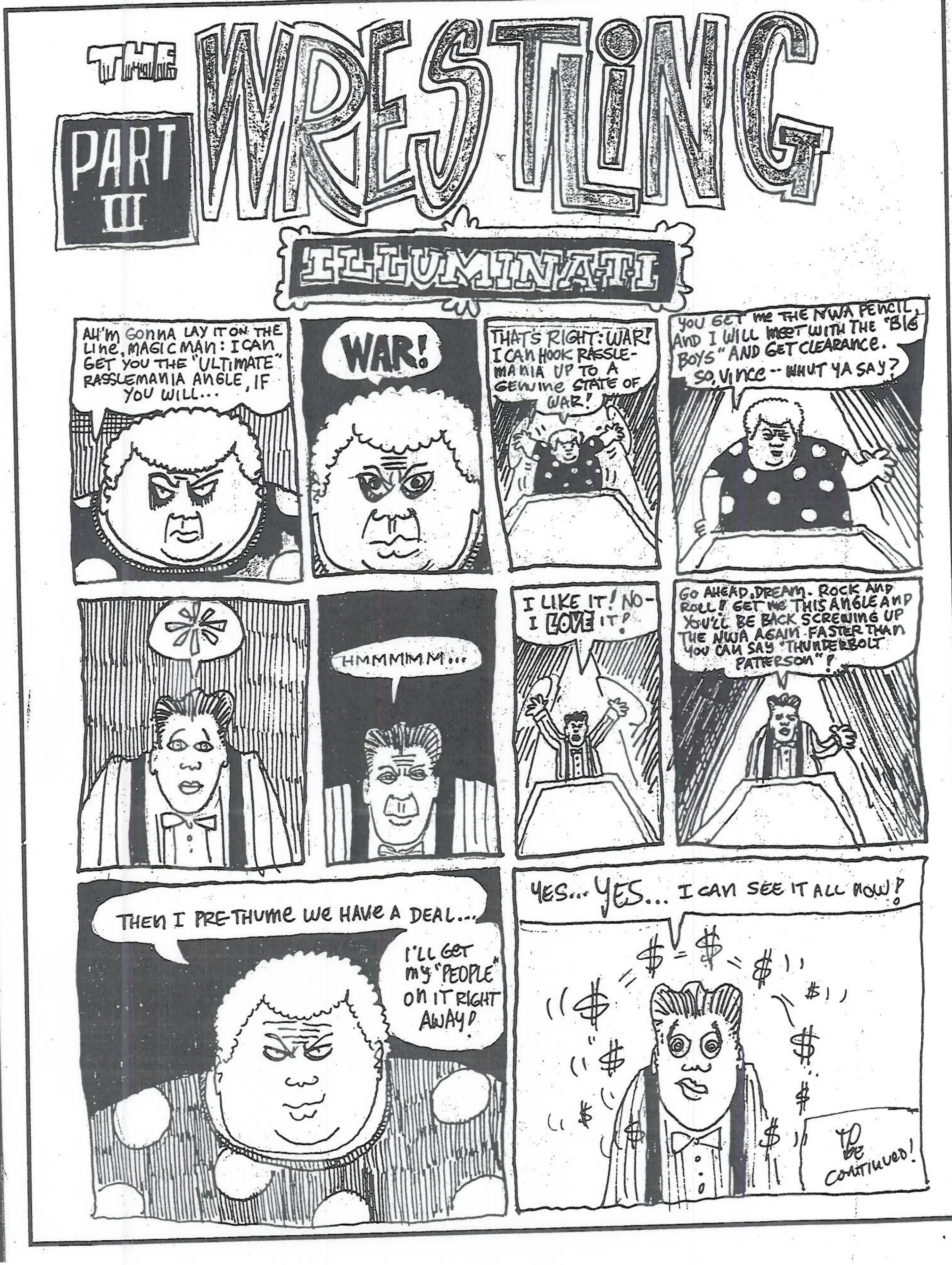
SAMMARTINO: I never saw Verne a whole lot. As far as selling wrestling in that ring, he was great. Same with Thesz. Bill Watts was great. Watts was a great brawler when he became a villain after he crossed me. But when Bill Watts was a good guy, Watts showed them wrestling. That's what I call a complete wrestler.

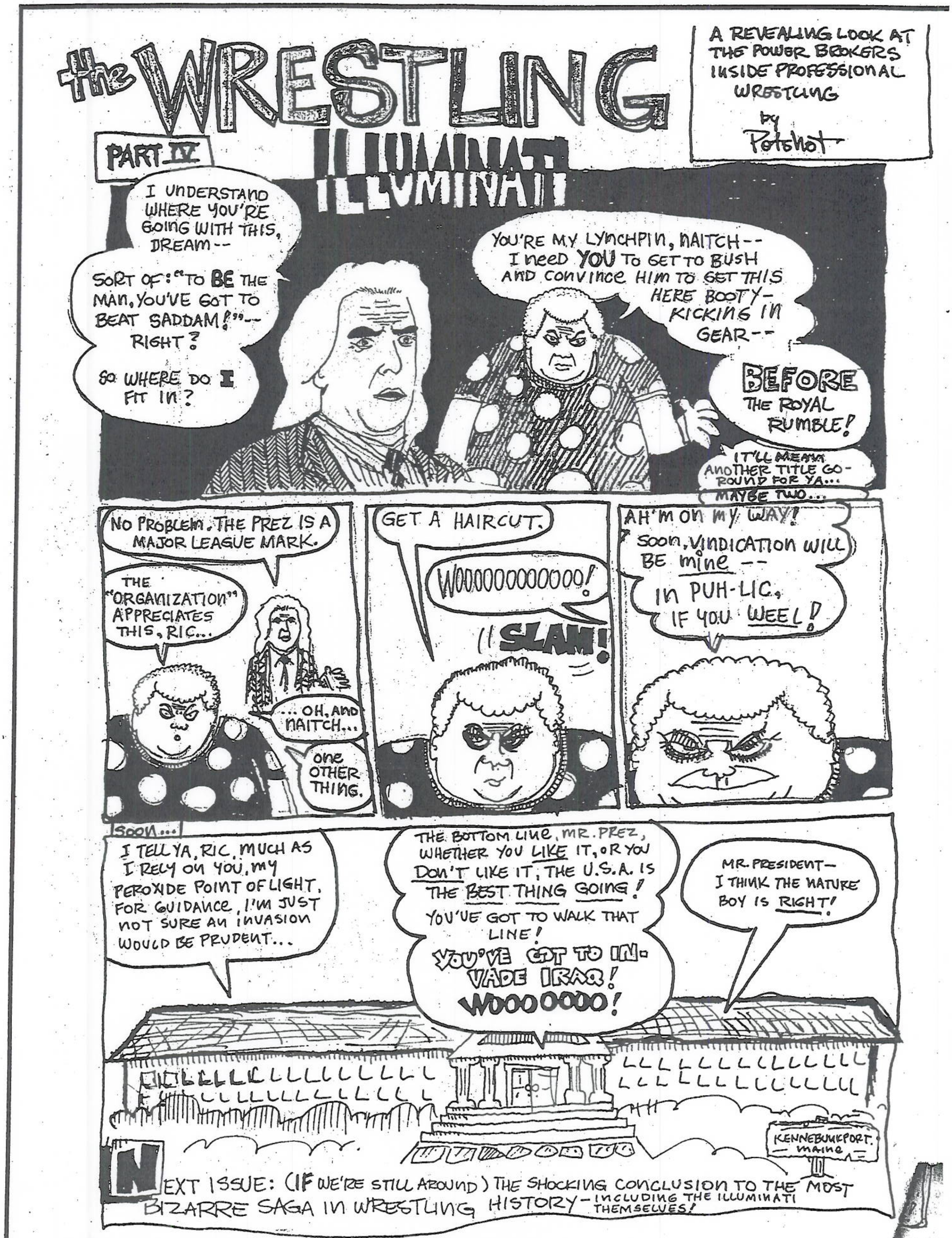
KELLER: Those are all the questions I have for you. Are there any areas I didn't cover that you'd like to go over?

SAMMARTINO: (laughs) No. I think we've covered just about everything.


HELLO, WRESTLING FANS, AND WELCOME TO A VERY SPECIAL INSTALLMENT OF "POTSHOTS" IN WHICH I REVEAL INFORMATION THAT COULD ROCK PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING TO ITS VERY CORE -- THE TRUTH, NOT ONLY ABOUT THE SGT. SLAUGHTER/IRAQ ANGLE, BUT ABOUT AN ORGANIZATION MORE POWERFUL THAN ANY WE HAVE EVER KNOWN. AS A RESULT OF THIS STORY SEEING PRINT, MY OWN LIFE ISN'T WORTH A PLUG NICKEL, BUT THE TRUTH MUST BE TOLD, THE TRUTH ABOUT...
THE WRESTLING ILLUMINATI
PART I
THE OFFICES OF TITAN SPORTS, AUGUST 10, 1990...
WELL, GENTLEMEN?
SUMMERSLAM IS UPON US, AND WE STILL DON'T KNOW WHERE WE'RE GOING WITH WRESTLEMANIA!
WHAT DO YOU CHARACTERS THINK THIS IS, ANYWAY-- THE NWA ?!?! (NO OFFENSE, DUSTY) -- WE'RE TITAN! WE ACTUALLY PLAN THESE THINGS IN ADVANCE!
GIVE
ME
IDEAS!
WELL, BOSS, WE CAN ALWAYS REPRISE LAST YEAR'S MAIN EVENT!
SURE! ONLY THIS TIME, WE TURN THE WARRIOR, FIRST!
PERHAPS THIS IS MY FAULT...
PERHAPS I DIDN'T PHRASE THAT QUITE AS CLEARLY AS I SHOULD HAVE--
GIVE
ME
GOOD
IDEAS!
OH, SORRY, VINCE...
OUR MISTAKE, BOSS...
GOOD IDEAS, EH? HMMM...
WELL?
I HAVE A-- HONK, WHEEZE --THUGGESTION.
YES, DREAM...GO ON.
AS IF WE COULD STOP YOU...
IT'S CRUNCH TIME, MAGIC VINCE, AND I CAN GIVE YOU THE HOTTEST RASSELMANIA ANGLE EVER--
BUT IT'LL COST YOU!
TO BE CONTINUED!

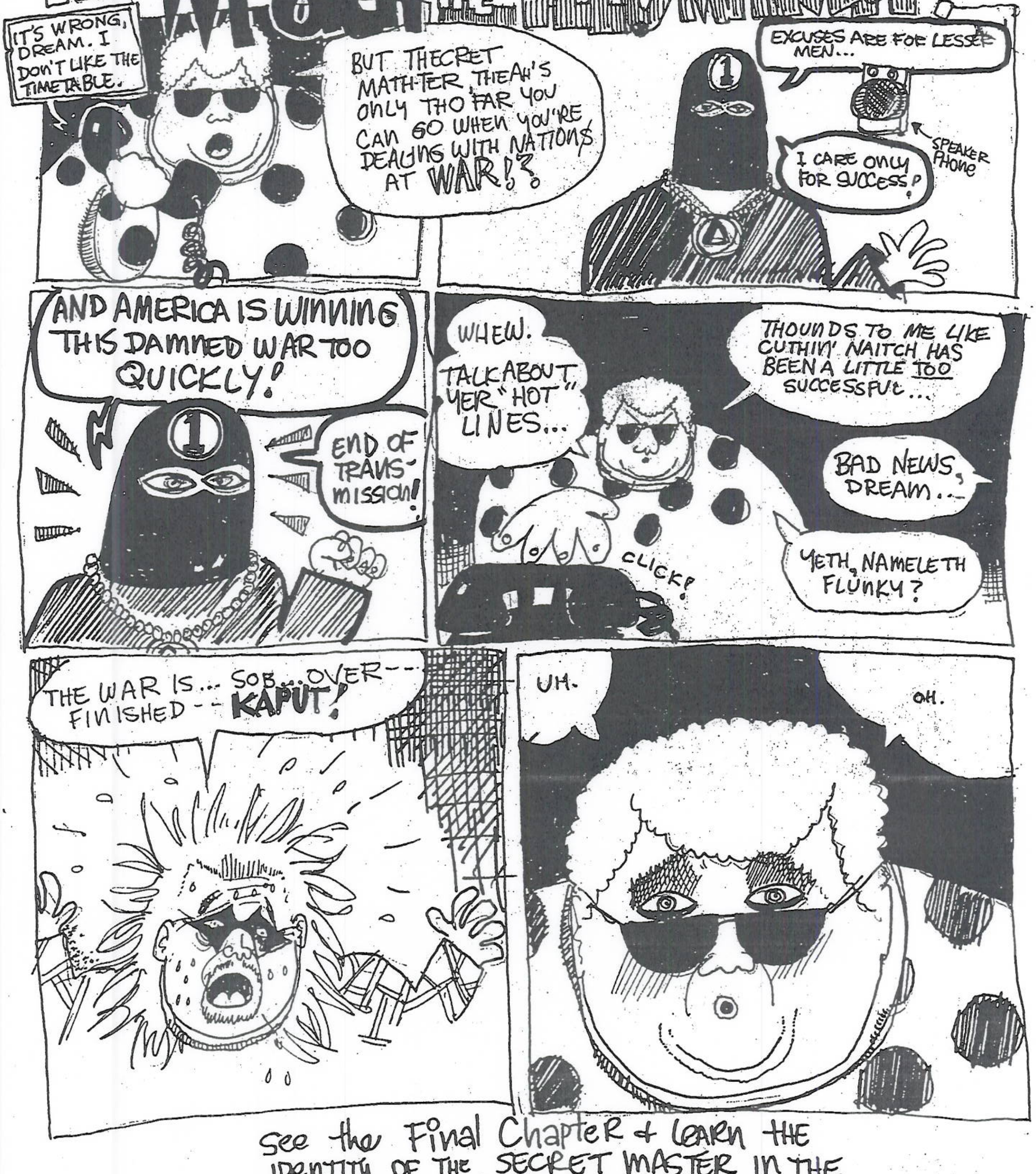

THTILL, THIS IS NOT THE THORT OF ANGLE THAT EVEN WE --HONK, WHEEZE-- CAN PULL OFF ON OUR OWN. WE'LL NEED TO CALL IN --
--THE WRESTLING ILLUMINATI!
PART II by POTSHOT
THE... ILLUMINATI?!?
YOU'VE GOT A BODYBUILDING PROMOTION TO FEED, VINTH, AND, REMEMBER, LAST YEAR'S WRESTLEMANIA WAS THUMTHING LETH THAN A FINANCIAL TRIUMPH, IF YOU WEEL...
BUT, DUSTY, CHRIST...
THE ILLUMINATI?!
HELL, EVEN I DON'T LIKE TO MESS WITH THOSE GUYS.
WHUTSAMATTUH, JUNIOR--GET A LIL' CASE OF CHOKE-ITIS? YOUR IRISH TESTICLES STAHT TO SHRIVEL? HEH.
N-NO, OF COURSE NOT, DREAM. I'VE DEALT WITH THEM BEFORE, YOU KNOW -- HOW DO YOU THINK I GOT WHERE I AM TODAY?
I'VE HOID THE RUMORS...
I HAD THE PLAN--THE VISION-- TO BRING WRESTLING INTO THE '80s!
ALL I NEEDED WAS A MEGA-FACE!
AND THEA WAS 'OL HULK HOGAN, A-WASTIN' AWAY ON VERNE'S PLANTATION...
THE ILLUMINATI IMMEDIATELY THAW THE WITH-DOM OF YOUR REQUEST AND YOU GOT HOGAN... TRUE, THEY DEMANDED "UNUSUAL" FAVORS IN RETURN, ON OCCASSION...
YEAH, LIKE MAKING ME PUSH BRAVO AND TENTA...
BUT THEY HAD THEIR REASONS
IN ANY CASE, I CAN GET YOU THE KICK-BUTT WRESTLEMANIA ANGLE OF ALL TIME --BUT THE DREAM WANTS SOMETHING, TOO--
I WANT TO BOOK THE N.W.A.!!


THE WRESTLING ILLUMINATI
PART III
AH'M GONNA LAY IT ON THE LINE, MAGIC MAN: I CAN GET YOU THE "ULTIMATE" RASSLEMANIA ANGLE, IF YOU WILL...
WAR!
THAT'S RIGHT: WAR! I CAN HOOK RASSLEMANIA UP TO A GENUINE STATE OF WAR!
YOU GET ME THE NWA PENCIL, AND I WILL MEET WITH THE "BIG BOYS" AND GET CLEARANCE. SO, VINCE -- WHUT YA SAY?
HMMMMM...
I LIKE IT! NO- I LOVE IT!
GO AHEAD, DREAM. ROCK AND ROLL! GET ME THIS ANGLE AND YOU'LL BE BACK SCREWING UP THE NWA AGAIN FASTER THAN YOU CAN SAY "THUNDERBOLT PATTERSON"!
THEN I PRE-THUME WE HAVE A DEAL...
I'LL GET MY "PEOPLE" ON IT RIGHT AWAY!
YES... YES... I CAN SEE IT ALL NOW!
TO BE CONTINUED!

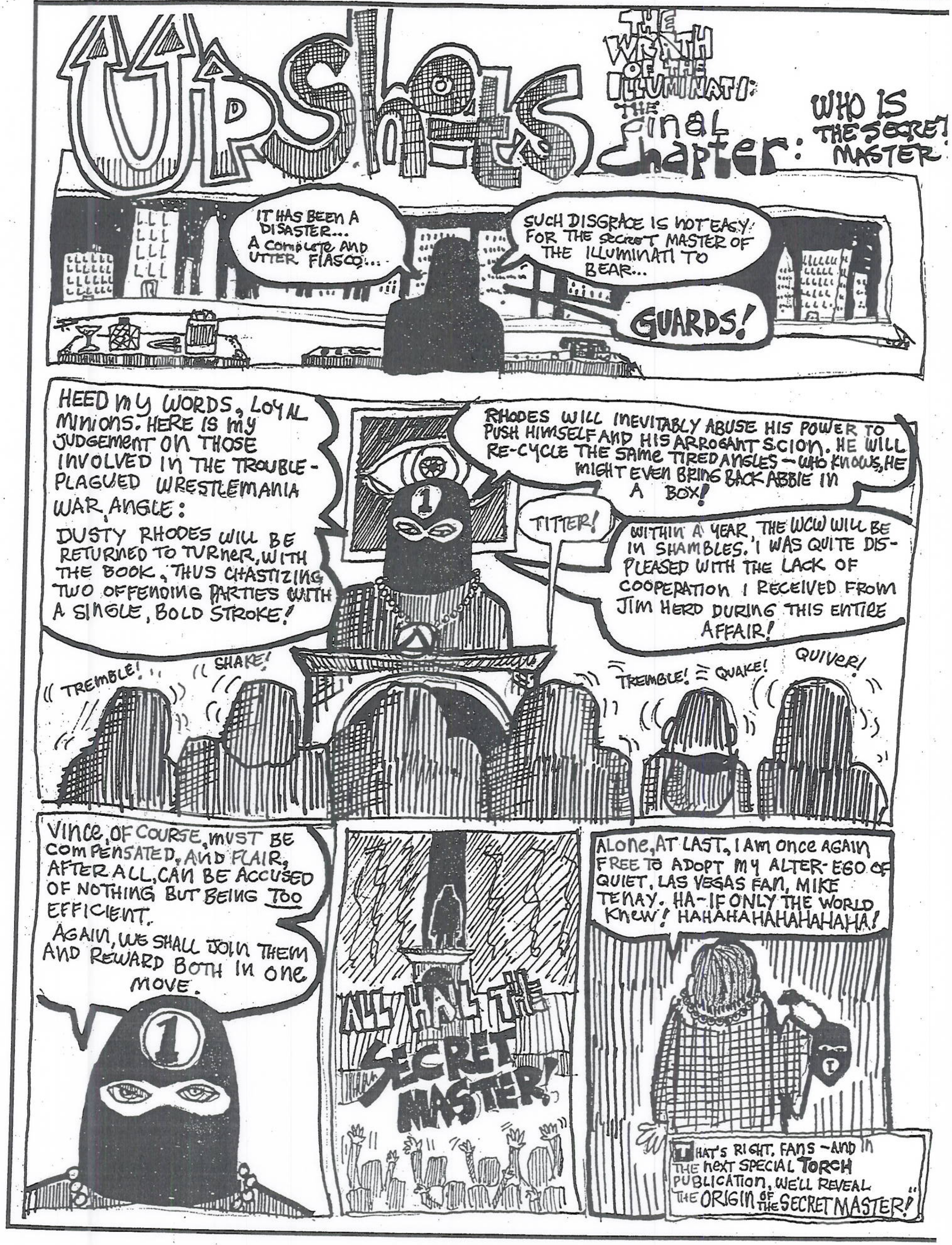

the WRESTLING ILLUMINATI
PART IV
A REVEALING LOOK AT THE POWER BROKERS INSIDE PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING by Potshot
I UNDERSTAND WHERE YOU'RE GOING WITH THIS, DREAM -- SORT OF: "TO BE THE MAN, YOU'VE GOT TO BEAT SADDAM!" -- RIGHT? SO WHERE DO I FIT IN?
YOU'RE MY LYNCHPIN, NAITCH -- I NEED YOU TO GET TO BUSH AND CONVINCE HIM TO GET THIS HERE BOOTY-KICKING IN GEAR -- BEFORE THE ROYAL RUMBLE!
IT'LL MEAN ANOTHER TITLE GO-ROUND FOR YA... MAYBE TWO...
NO PROBLEM. THE PREZ IS A MAJOR LEAGUE MARK.
THE "ORGANIZATION" APPRECIATES THIS, RIC...
... OH, AND NAITCH...
ONE OTHER THING.
GET A HAIRCUT.
WOOOOOOOOOOOO!
SLAM!
AH'M ON MY WAY! SOON, VINDICATION WILL BE MINE -- IN PUH-LIC, IF YOU WEEL!
SOON...
I TELL YA, RIC, MUCH AS I RELY ON YOU, MY PEROXIDE POINT OF LIGHT, FOR GUIDANCE, I'M JUST NOT SURE AN INVASION WOULD BE PRUDENT...
THE BOTTOM LINE, MR. PREZ, WHETHER YOU LIKE IT, OR YOU DON'T LIKE IT, THE U.S.A. IS THE BEST THING GOING! YOU'VE GOT TO WALK THAT LINE! YOU'VE GOT TO IN-VADE IRAQ! WOOOOOOO!
MR. PRESIDENT -- I THINK THE NATURE BOY IS RIGHT!
KENNEBUNKPORT, MAINE
NEXT ISSUE: (IF WE'RE STILL AROUND) THE SHOCKING CONCLUSION TO THE MOST BIZARRE SAGA IN WRESTLING HISTORY - INCLUDING THE ILLUMINATI THEMSELVES!

THE REWARDS FOR SUCCESS ARE HIGH, BUT THE PUNISHMENT FOR FAILURE CAN MAKE AN ETERNITY WITH THE CENOBYTES SEEM LIKE SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE, AND, SPEAKING OF GEORGE...

THE WRATH OF THE ILLUMINATI!


IT'S WRONG, DREAM. I DON'T LIKE THE TIMETABLE.
BUT THECRET MATHTER, THEAH'S ONLY THO FAR YOU CAN GO WHEN YOU'RE DEALING WITH NATIONS AT WAR!?
EXCUSES ARE FOR LESSER MEN...
I CARE ONLY FOR SUCCESS!
SPEAKER PHONE
AND AMERICA IS WINNING THIS DAMNED WAR TOO QUICKLY!
END OF TRANSMISSION!
WHEW.
TALK ABOUT YER "HOT" LINES...
THOUNDS TO ME LIKE CUTHIN' NAITCH HAS BEEN A LITTLE TOO SUCCESSFUL...
BAD NEWS, DREAM...
CLICK!
YETH, NAMELETH FLUNKY?
THE WAR IS... SOB... OVER--- FINISHED -- KAPUT!
UH.
OH.

See the Final Chapter & learn the identity of the SECRET MASTER in the LAST INSTALLMENT: "UPSHOTS!"


UPSHOTS
THE WRATH OF THE ILLUMINATI: THE FINAL CHAPTER: WHO IS THE SECRET MASTER?
IT HAS BEEN A DISASTER... A COMPLETE AND UTTER FIASCO...
SUCH DISGRACE IS NOT EASY FOR THE SECRET MASTER OF THE ILLUMINATI TO BEAR...
GUARDS!
HEED MY WORDS, LOYAL MINIONS. HERE IS MY JUDGEMENT ON THOSE INVOLVED IN THE TROUBLE-PLAGUED WRESTLEMANIA WAR ANGLE: DUSTY RHODES WILL BE RETURNED TO TURNER, WITH THE BOOK, THUS CHASTIZING TWO OFFENDING PARTIES WITH A SINGLE, BOLD STROKE!
RHODES WILL INEVITABLY ABUSE HIS POWER TO PUSH HIMSELF AND HIS ARROGANT SCION. HE WILL RE-CYCLE THE SAME TIRED ANGLES — WHO KNOWS, HE MIGHT EVEN BRING BACK ABBIE IN A BOX!
TITTER!
WITHIN A YEAR, THE WCW WILL BE IN SHAMBLES. I WAS QUITE DISPLEASED WITH THE LACK OF COOPERATION I RECEIVED FROM JIM HERD DURING THIS ENTIRE AFFAIR!
TREMBLE!
SHAKE!
TREMBLE!
QUAKE!
QUIVER!
VINCE, OF COURSE, MUST BE COMPENSATED. AND FLAIR, AFTER ALL, CAN BE ACCUSED OF NOTHING BUT BEING TOO EFFICIENT. AGAIN, WE SHALL JOIN THEM AND REWARD BOTH IN ONE MOVE.
ALL HAIL THE SECRET MASTER!
ALONE, AT LAST, I AM ONCE AGAIN FREE TO ADOPT MY ALTER-EGO OF QUIET, LAS VEGAS FAN, MIKE TENAY. HA-IF ONLY THE WORLD KNEW! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!
THAT'S RIGHT, FANS — AND IN THE NEXT SPECIAL TORCH PUBLICATION, WE'LL REVEAL THE ORIGIN OF THE SECRET MASTER!"

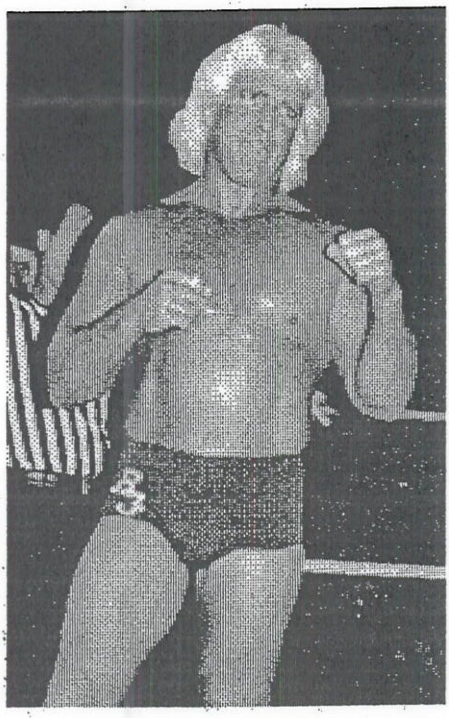
PRO WRESTLING FANS' MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS

ANY FAN OF ANY SPORT HAS MEMORIES OF EVENTS THAT MAKE FOLLOWING THAT SPORT WORTHWHILE, BE IT SITTING BEHIND HOME PLACE AT A WORLD SERIES GAME, CATCHING A FOOTBALL, GETTING HIT IN THE FACE WITH A HOCKEY PUCK, OR HAVING A BASKETBALL PLAYER FALL INTO YOUR LAP DIVING FOR A STRAY BALL. IN PRO WRESTLING, THE MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS OF ITS FANS DELVES INTO THE MORE UNUSUAL, THE MORE BLOODY, THE MORE STRANGE, AND THE MORE INTERESTING. THE FOLLOWING SEVERAL PAGES FEATURE *THE TORCH* READERS' MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS AS FANS OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING, SO SIT BACK AND RELIVE A FEW VERY SPECIAL MOMENTS IN THE LIVES OF FELLOW WRESTLING FANS, YOUNG AND OLD.

KEN KNISELY (Houston, TX): I have been fan of televised wrestling since the early 70s, but it was not until 1988 that I began attending house shows. At that time, house shows had already begun their long decline, so I really do not have any "Most Memorable Moments" from the arenas. I do, however, have two memorable moments which occurred outside the arena.

The first memorable moment occurred during February of 1990. At that time, I managed a limo company that primarily transported people from their homes to the airport. One afternoon, I was at the airport down in the baggage claim area looking for the group that I was there to pick-up. As I was looking for the group, I turned around and standing no more than five feet away from me was none other than the World Heavyweight Champion, Ric Flair.

My first instinct was to let out a resounding "Whoo!" Well, after the "Whoo" left my brain, but before it left my mouth, I had a vision of an irate Flair, upset with being disturbed, slapping the figure four on my boney legs right there on the terminal floor. I could not manage to stop the "whoo," but I did render it nearly inaudible.



"NATURE BOY" RIC FLAIR

Well, I had to do something to attract the "Champ's" attention. I summoned up all of the intelligence that I possessed. Sixteen years of education, and the best that I could come up with was, "Hey, aren't you Ric Flair?" Really bright, huh? Ric responded, "Yeah, nice to know you," and quickly walked away. As he walked away, he seemed quite irritated. Good thing I didn't "whoo" him.

As Ric Flair left, he went directly to the lost luggage claims office. How dare the airlines lose the luggage of the World Heavyweight Champ. No wonder Ric was in a bad mood.

At the time that occurred, I was in a state of transition as I had only been reading the *Wrestling Observer* for two months and it would be many more months before I would discover *The Torch*. Therefore, I was just beginning to understand the behind the scenes business aspects of pro wrestling. Also, during this time I was living above my office and had no cable television. Therefore, I was unaware that the previous night, Sting had hurt his knee at the Clash in Corpus Christi and would be unable to wrestle at the pay-per-view in three weeks. I was also unaware that booker Ric Flair was under fire for this occurrence, as well as many others. In fact, Ric Flair was to resign as booker soon after this. All of these problems, and lost luggage, too.

In retrospect, I consider myself fortunate to have met the champ, even under those circumstances. Due to the newsletters, I have a much better understanding of the world of professional wrestling and now realize that wrestlers are much more than what one sees on television and in the arenas. They are more than mythical heroes. They are living, breathing human beings with many of the same problems that trouble us mere mortals. I was just beginning to understand this on that February day. I also consider myself fortunate that Ric Flair did not apply the figure-four on me for annoying him at such a trying moment in time.

The other memorable moment occurred last autumn. At this time, Bobby Heenan was at the height of his feud with the Big Bossman's mother.

This memorable moment began as I was on my way to the mailbox, probably to get my *Pro Wrestling Torch*. I noticed that a woman was moving into the vacant apartment near the mailbox. This woman was, to be generous, quite large. And she was from Georgia. How did I know this? Her car had Georgia license plates which also list the county the driver is from. From what county was this round, robust women from? Why, Cobb County, of course.

Well, once again, as has happened so many times in the past, my mouth overruled my brain. I began to laugh maniacally as I asked her if she was the Big Bossman's mother. I quickly closed my eyes and prepared for the worst. I had visions of being squashed by this mammoth mother. After a few seconds, I opened my eyes to see this woman looking at me with a combination of curiosity and apprehension. Fortunately, she was not a wrestling fan and had no idea what I was talking about. Either that, or she is accustomed to being called Mrs. Rogers.

CHARLES WARBURTON (Staten Island, NY): One of my most memorable moments was seeing my first world title change hands when Stan Hansen defeated Rick Martel on 12/29/85 at the Meadowlands. I started to read Bob Closson and Jay Steele's *Mat Results* six months earlier but still had no indication that it was going to happen, which was probably the best part. The match was not too good and most of the fans left after the previous Ric Flair vs. Dusty Rhodes encounter. I was truly shocked at how the title changed by submission.

Also, seeing my first televised match in mid-1982. It was "Playboy" Buddy Rose vs. "Quick Draw" Rick McGraw. I was eleven years old at the time and all I said to my father was that it looked fake and phoney. However, my eyes were glued to the screen and I quickly became addicted. One of my fondest memories was being amazed at Blackjack Mulligan's claw hold. Every time he put it on a jobber, they would superimpose a red "X" over the screen so as to avoid showing the blood. Interesting enough, Jimmy Snuka would get piledriven on the concrete floor by Ray Stevens and bled like a stuck pig and there was no "X" to be found. The WWF was excellent back then, even though the actual matches could not compare with many of the NWA regional promotions.

The biggest thrill of my life at the time was finding Florida wrestling on UHF channel 47. The show was on at 11:30 pm on Monday nights, so I was not allowed to watch it because I was in junior high at the time. However, as luck would have it, I got sick and was out of school for a week. I planned my night to stay up and watch this show. I had been reading magazines, so I had an idea of who was down there. It was great seeing something so totally different than I was used to seeing. This was around the time Dusty was teaming with Terry Funk against Kendo Nagasaki and King Tonga (now Haku) with the infamous Funk turn on Dusty. I became a devoted fan of all promotions, even though I did not see the majority of them. That was when "World Championship Wrestling" was the only show seen on national cable.

Another memorable moment was seeing the NWA come to the Metropolitan area for the first time in decades and put on a great show which drew 14,000 fans and would have sold out if not for the torrential rainstorms. Watching Ric Flair vs. Rick Steamboat was a big thrill, especially since the two of them were among my most favorite wrestlers and the match is still one of my all-time favorites. I wanted Steamboat to win the belt and was pretty pissed when Flair used the tights to win. Watching the crowd turn from cheering Flair to wanting Steamboat to win was great.

Meeting Ric Flair the day before at a local arcade for an autograph session is also memorable. It was the first time I ever met a wrestler and he was very nice. I asked him if his match against Harley Race at Starrcade '83 was his toughest and he said yes. I then wished him luck in his match against Steamboat the next night and he thanked me.

Currently, my most memorable moments came when I was allowed in the locker room area at an IWCCW show. I know most people will say, "Big Deal," but it was a big thrill since I was writing an article on wrestling for *St. Johns University's Arrow* newspaper. I was able to interview Tony Atlas, Vic Steamboat, Joe Savoldi, S.D. Jones, and the one and only Curly Moe, among others. All of the wrestlers treated me like a professional when I interviewed them. Thanks again go out to Billy Caputo, Tommy Dee, and Mario Savoldi.

And considering the state of wrestling, one memory I better keep in mind is seeing the Meadowlands Arena sold out on 2/24/85 for a "Pro Wrestling USA" card.

While the memories may seem trivial, I truly loved wrestling and enjoyed it more than anything. The early to mid-eighties were a great time in wrestling, not just for me, but for everybody. The total domination of the WWF from 1985 to the present has sickened me as they have never presented wrestling the way I and many other people liked it. Bill Watts, I hope you come back some day. You treated your wrestlers like athletes, not like cartoon characters.

LENIS SARGENT (Gainsville, GA): It was April of 1988 in a small Junior High School Gym. It was a small crowd of possibly 250 to 300 fans. Most of the ones there were kids from the school. They were a rowdy bunch as the coach kept telling the kids to be sure to throw trash in the trash cans and other commands throughout the entire night. This was a special night as it was the last time I saw Frank Goodish as he was killed only three months later.

> "As I kept backing up ever so slowly I bumped into somebody, and as I turned around, there stood Brody with a chair over his head with that look in his eyes, and he looked me in the eyes and barked that famous "ARRRRGH" and I thought that was the end for me."

The main event of the night saw Bruiser Brody & Jerry Blackwell fight Dick Slater & Abdullah to the outside of the building onto the lawn on the outside. Everyone ran to the door and squeezed their way out to see the brawl. Then suddenly Jerry & Abby headed back to the entrance as did I. I got in before they did and as they came in they made their way in my direction and I slowly walked backwards as they got closer and closer. In the corner of my eye I caught Slater on the other side of the arena making his way towards the others. As I kept backing up ever so slowly I bumped into somebody, and as I turned around, there stood Brody with a chair over his head with that look in his eyes, and he looked me in the eyes and barked that famous "ARRRRGH" and I thought that was the end for me. I quickly stepped aside and must have acted like Hellwig after his run to the ring; I was breathless! That was a confrontation that I will never forget.

The melee ensued as both teams were counted out and all four were a bloody mess. It was one of the greatest brawls I have ever witnessed live. By the way, the kids won the battle in the end over the coach as Brody emptied every trash can in the gym on the floor as he threw them at Abby and Slater.

The second episode was a typical night at the Omni in the early eighties. The action was like it should be. If only it were the same today, but that is a wish that seems to ever fade away. The main event of the night was an NWA World Title match. I want to emphasize the word "World." Harley Race was defending the title against former champion Tommy Rich., with special referee Lou Thesz. I had a gut feeling that Rich would no doubt regain the title that night. It was one of those cards where there was no way you were going to miss it, no matter what. But the crowd never even knew that match took place.

The semi-main event was a cage match between Dusty Rhodes & Ole Anderson vs. The Original Assassins. A special stipulation in the match was that each team got to pick a special referee for the match and all six would be in the ring at the same time, counting the two refs. The ref for Dusty's team was Gene Anderson, and the ref for the Assassins was Ivan Koloff. I ve seriously doubt anyone in the entire Omni h any idea what was about to happen. I know I d not, although I did figure it out fairly early in the bout.

It was a typical cage match. The crowd w into the match like I have never seen since th night. Ole played the crowd brilliantly, as did t rest. Suddenly Dusty got into trouble and O refused to tag. Then Gene started going blind force tags by Dusty. Then it happened. O looked at Dusty, then he looked at the crow then at the heels. Then at the urging of Koloff laid the boots to Dusty.

The crowd went berserk. They starte yelling obscenities with more hatred than y can imagine. The fights began in the crowd. actually saw two cops carrying out another c with his feet dragging on the ground! Figh were breaking out faster that the cops could bre them up. All this as Dusty was getting mauled the four heels. Finally help came for Dusty, b they could not get in as Gene pounded the finge of the rescuers as they climbed the cage. A gu on the aisle down below me started yelling at usher and I saw the usher reach into his pock and pull out a switch blade and I left the sce and watched the rest of the massacre from t upper corridor. Finally, Lars Anderson got t cage door open and dragged Dusty out of t cage with Ole and Gene kicking away at the "brother."

They finally got the crowd under contr and took down the cage for the main event. T excitement of the cage match took away t excitement I had for the title match. A lot of t people had left because of the mini-riot, and t rest were restless from the prior match. I ke noticing that Lou kept an eye on the crow during the match as a few fights were sti breaking out even thirty minutes or so late They went to a finisher pretty fast for a tit match, as you can imagine. The crowd just w not into the title match one iota. I watched t match, to an extent, and kept saying to myse that with all this going on there was no way the were going to have a title change. I was a litt miffed at that fact, and even felt a little sorry f Rich & Race as it was like they were not gettin the respect they were due that night. That tit match had been anticipated for weeks. Now th I look back at it with a little more understandin of the mat game, was it just another case of Dus stealing the spotlight or not? In any case, he di

BRENT E. CLARK (North Tonawand NY): On the night of June 26 of this past yea the NWA came to the nearby Memorial Arena i Niagra Falls, Ontario, about a half-hour dri from my house in North Tonawanda, N Besides myself and my best friend Joe Morri my dad went along to watch the matches. Wel when we got across the bridge in Canada, w asked the guy at the booth how to get to the aren and after he gave directions to us, he told us th some of the wrestlers just came by. So I said t Joe, maybe we can meet some of them when w get there. Joe said, "I doubt it, but we might Well, when we got to the parking lot, we saw R Flair, Arn Anderson, The Midnight Express, ar Jim Cornette get out of a van. I said, "Let's wa a minute before we bother them." Well, by th time we got around the corner of the arena, the were gone. We just started walking to the front of the arena to get in when my dad and I passed a side door with Joe behind us. Then, all of a sudden, the door flew open and knocked Joe over. My dad and I turned around to see what had happened and the man who opened the door was the "Nature Boy" Ric Flair himself. And behind him was Arn Anderson. Wow! We talked for nearly five minutes and got their autographs.

PAUL KLAPPER: When WrestleWar `91 came to Phoenix, I was fired up because I had never seen an NWA or WCW show live. My wife and I got second row ringside seats for the big pay-per-view.

That day I met Wade Keller and spotted Dave Meltzer in the crowd. There were photographers and cameramen hovering around our corner of the ring. Bobby Eaton and Brad Armstrong were putting on an exciting match, but Bobby needed heel heat. He threw Brad out of the ring and jumped out to try to bang his head on the steel railing. I took the opportunity to stand up and shake my fists at Eaton, three stooges style. I could tell he appreciated it. A little later when I returned from the restroom, my wife Julie said the photographer had asked her for our names.

Later, during Terry Taylor's intro for his match with Z-Man, I cheered loudly. As the cameraman followed the stars, he pointed the camera straight at me and turned down his thumbs, which I took as "direction" to boo. And did I ever, but I also started smirking, knowing I was on camera.

A few days later I was in my office working away with the door shut. I heard a knock and one of my colleagues said to me, "Klapper, I can't believe you have this wrestling stuff all over your door." Well, I didn't even know about it, but when I looked, there it was - the front page of the Entertainment section of the *Phoenix Gazette* with a giant close-up photo of Sid Vicious, and below that, a six-inch color photo of me shaking my fist at Bobby. The caption read: "Paul Klapper of Phoenix taunts wrestler, 'Beautiful' Bobby Eaton. Fans often treat the ring's bad guys to obscenities." As Hawk would say, "Aaaaahhh, what a rush."

Saturday afternoon, I was trying to recover from a serious wrestling overdose. A friend called and said, "I just saw you on TBS on WCW on the Fan Funline commercial." I turned on the set and saw if myself. Sure enough, the commercial lingered on the shot of me looking, smirking, and giving the old thumbs down sign as Terry Taylor "walked the aisle." WrestleWar revisited.

Well, WrestleWar `91 was great. I got to relive it for months every time I saw myself on TV. My most memorable moments were memorialized on video and in print in one week, thanks to WCW and the *Phoenix Gazette*.

BOBBY YATES (Asheboro, NC): One memorable moment was on November 30, 1990 in Randleman, NC when Bobby Fulton was doubleteamed by the Pit Bull Dogs. As they beat him up, my Shiite Brothers and I yelled, "If it's Hines, it got to be good." Bobby cracked-up a laugh while being pummelled.

Or, November 30, 1990, Randleman, NC when Jackie Fulton was fighting The Pitbulls. We chanted "Batman, Batman, Batman...." He got thrown over the top rope, landed at our feet, looked up, and said, "Batman?"

Or, May 18, 1991 in St. Petersburgh, FL for Sid's last match before leaving WCW and hit the field. He saw my sign that said, "Vince has Softballs," and broke character and into uncontrolled laughter for a moment.

Or, July 4, 1991, Monroe, NC, Jim Cornette hid under the ring to keep from getting in the battle royal. Bambi went after him. Stan Lane followed. After a minute Stan came out, adjusted his tights, and said, "Thanks." He then smiled and pretended to smoke a cigarette.

CHARLIE DEVIN: My most memorable moment in wrestling was the Ric Flair vs. Ricky Steamboat match from the Meadowlands. It was such an exciting match with plenty of chops and highspots involved. I do not recall any rest spots in the match. It was a scientific match with no real heel moves by Flair. Flair pinned Steamboat in about forty-five minutes, and I will never forget the crowd reaction on the way out of the Meadowlands that night. So many people commented that it was the best match they have ever seen and I agree. It was the best match and most memorable match I've been fortunate enough to see.

BILL BEHRENS (Atlanta, GA): As a television program syndicator, someone who places TV shows on TV stations, I have had many opportunities to meet and talk with pro wrestlers.

However, it was while in college in Atlanta that I first spoke at length to a pro wrestler. A group of us had convinced a teacher that there was a research paper screaming to be written about pro wrestling. My job was to get access to a wrestler. Promoter Paul Jones's office offered me time with Rocky "Soul Man" Johnson,. who was pleased I knew of his "Soul Man" label, received when he danced on a California dance show. I asked Rocky "the question" about wrestling being real or fake. He said, "Everything you see actually happens."

It was years later when I began attending the NATPE television conventions that I next spoke with pro wrestlers. I remember helping Ox Baker sit down, and him complaining that his knees were so bad he was taking a lot of pain medication and could barely walk. I told this to other wrestlers years later who all seem to wonder how his knees got so bad when few can remember the Ox taking a serious bump.

I remember Lex Luger telling me that after Abby the Butcher returned to action several years ago from what I remember was kidney trouble, he had lost so much weight that he was caught wrapping towels around his waist to fill out his pants. It also may have been for protection.

I once showed Tony Atlas an Apter article that listed him as the first of the "big" men in wrestling, suggesting he had legendary status. Tony asked to keep the magazine. I later found out from Mario Savoldi that he had used the article to ask for a raise. Mario said no.

At a recent convention, Family Feud's diminutive host Ray Combs asked Sting to take some pictures with him. Sting agreed and lifted Ray up into a piledriver position for several photos. After being put down, Combs shocked Rick and Scott Steiner by placing the Stinger in an airplane spin for several minutes.

THE STEINER BROTHERS

Upon being set back on his feet, Sting paid off the move by taking several steps, tucking his arm, and performing a Flair fall on his face. Seems Ray used to wrestle in school and still stays in shape.

Probably the most fun was this year when I returned to Atlanta with Joe Pedicino's Global guys. Before the flight, I had drinks with the Canadian Giant (Gary) and Lord Littlebrook at the airport bar. Lord Littlebrook told great stories including one about Stu Hart. Seems Stu likes cats and does not clean up after them. The Lord remembered Stu offering him eggs one morning after having cleaned cat droppings off the counter with his spatula. The Lord was not hungry.

The actual flight back to Atlanta was even more interesting. Everybody, including Pedicino, assumed the Giant had a first class seat. Well, this was Eastern's last day in business and might have actually been their last flight The flight was packed. The Giant was in coach as were all of the other wrestlers. Due to a mistake most had middle seats. Then the fligh was delayed. A light on the captain's pane would not go off. No other airline would help and Eastern's mechanic was at home in bed. The Giant was not happy and Pedicino was concerned. I spoke to the flight attendant and convinced him to open the bar. We then invited the Giant up to the first class section. I had been upgraded from coach. The Giant was the cente of attention and much happier as he pounded back some beers and talked with the passengers At one point, he offered to get out and throw the plane to Atlanta.

JOHN BINDER (Marshfield, WI): The greatest moment for me as a wrestling fan came on May 5, 1990. This was the night of Twin Wars `90 at the St. Paul Civic Center. This wa the first time I went to a major arena show. I was also the first time I saw the AWA at th Civic Center, where most of the all-time classi AWA matches have taken place. Stepping int the building I could almost feel a sense o history. Also, seeing Ric Flair live for the firs

"Well, Koko sang agai After that, everyon around me sighed i relief. But wait, Me said this time, "Let's tr it one more time wit some feeling." Thi time, the crowd was no laughing. We were al pissed-off because it wa getting late. I got up an started "reacting because I did not want t hear it again. But th funniest part was a ki around 10 years old nex to me. He was scream ing at his grandfather "Get up Grandpa or he'l sing again!"

time was quite a thrill. Twin Wars `90 may not have been a huge financial or a critical success, but for a teenager from Marshfield, Wisconsin, it was a spectacular event.

GREG ANDERSON (WA): My sharpest memories from 24 years of watching Portland Wrestling include not only things that happened in the ring and on TV, but also things of a more personal nature. Back in the 70s I attended many spot shows in my hometown of Longview, Washington. For most of this period, I always booed the heels and cheered the faces. Also, at this time I entertained notions of becoming a pro wrestler when I was old enough. One night I was in the lobby during one of the matches and spotted one of the wrestlers standing around, so I mustered up enough bravery to approach him with my interest in joining his profession. The wrestler was Manny Cruz and I asked him, "How do you get into pro wrestling?" He very sternly looked me up and down and with no change in expression he mumbled, "It's hard," and promptly exited the area. As I reflected back on this incident in later years, I realize that perhaps I got away lucky. You see, Manny Cruz's real name is Jose Juertes Gonzales and he is notorious as the man responsible for the death of Bruiser Brody.

Another evening in Longview, a friend and I had a one night stint as sort of "3rd Row, Section B." There was a heel vs. heel match between "Professor" Dale Lewis (doing Roy Shires's erudite professor gimmick) and Kurt Von Steiger (once part of the top heel "Nazi" team in the territory). The fans favored the German and my friend and I were very vocal in our support of Lewis. Many of the fans around us were getting very angry with us and tried to drown us out. After several moments of tense competition (in the crowd, not in the ring), Lewis got the win and to the sheer vehemence of those around us, he came over to us and shook our hands. Ralph Kramden was never as steamed as that crowd!

Moving on to 1980, I was doing an article for Norm Keitzer's *Wrestling News* on the hot feud between Playboy Buddy Rose and Roddy Piper and set up interviews with both men. The night I was to talk to Rose, I let Don Owens know I was ready and he said he would get Rose, but I was tersely warned to "Watch what you say." I sensed Don didn't understand that I was writing for a wrestling magazine that would never print anything that could be construed as a kayfabe violation. He probably thought I was a newspaper reporter with a hidden agenda. Anyway, I was able to talk to Rose and he seemed very eager to be getting the national publicity. He was very honest about his beginnings as a recruit in the Verne Gagne-Billy Robinson training camp and how he didn't succeed the first time, but "stuck it out and made it" on a second attempt. Of course, once we got to the feud with Piper, it was "work city." This man who was such a detestable heel in the ring was very nice to my girlfriend (now my wife) and me and gave me a lot of great quotes for the article. When the mag came out, I gave a copy of it to Rose and later I asked him how he liked it and he said it was very good.

"PLAYBOY" BUDDY ROSE

As for Piper, he too was very cooperative, although he assumed the hyper Piper interview persona for the entire question-and-answer session. We got lots of great quotes which could qualify for "Quotebook" and all-in-all the interview was great fun. After we were through, we accompanied Piper out to the parking lot of the Portland Sports Arena. He was approached by a young mother and her children and Mom invited him over for dinner. Piper politely declined, citing his busy schedule as the reason he couldn't. Piper then took a few extra moments to talk with the children in a sign of true class.

I also conducted an interview with Curt Hennig for an article in a mag called *Official Wrestling* (I had done an earlier feature on Billy Jack Haynes for the publication). The interview went well and it was assumed by Hennig and me that the story would be published. Hennig even gave me his home address in Vancouver, Washington where I was also living at the time so I could send him two copies, one for him and another for Larry "The Axe." After the article was sent in, a last minute decision was made not to print it. I always regretted this because I then assumed that Hennig thought I was a fraud. If Curt is reading this, I would like to say a very belated "I'm sorry." I still have a copy of the manuscript somewhere in the house.

These were the more memorable moments of a personal nature derived from being a wrestling fan in the Northwest. The following are random memories of a not-so-personal variety:

*In 1975, "Bruiser" Bob Remus's act was so convincing to one fan that he grabbed a metal chair and blindsided Remus and konked him on the head so hard that it knocked him senseless. In his groggy state, Remus grabbed the pocket of a ringside cop and ripped it from his pants. Most of you probably know that Bob Remus now "competes" in the ring as Sgt. Slaughter. For all the fuss raised over possible repercussions over the recent Iraqi angle in the WWF, it is ironic that the above-described incident took place so many years earlier.

*During a bout between Dutch Savage and Steven Little Bear, the Indian back dropped Savage so high (Savage always loved to give an extra push off his opponent's shoulders to get a lot of height) his feet hit an overhead ring ligh shattering the glass, and when he landec countless slivers of glass were embedded i Savage's skin.

*Randy "Moose" Morse was a wrestler wh topped the scales at around the 300 pound mar and one night, he went into the ropes to do a spc when the top ropes snapped, sending Mors backwards to the floor and he landed on his heac In those days, there were no mats on the floor an Morse was knocked cold. You could tell it wa legit as everything stopped and several wrestler and ref Sandy Barr tended to the unconsciou grappler and the card was held up for severa minutes before anyone even attempted to mov him. Things turned out okay as Morse suffered concussion, but recovered completely.

*Finally, I have many fond recollections c several NWA World Champions who made visit to Portland to defend the belt. Great wrestler like Dory Funk Jr., Jack Brisco, Terry Funk Harley Race, and the legendary Ric Flair put u the gold against whoever the current to babyface or Northwest Champion was. Th visiting champ always sold his butt off and mad it look like the title would change hands befor our eyes. As fans, we hoped, but knew dee down that the strap was not changing ownershi even though TV hype suggested that it was ver possible.

One time, Flair even put up the title i Longview. His opponent was Rocky "Soulman Johnson, who I never thought was a good worke despite his reputation as a top star. Flair carrie Johnson to a great match in front of a relativel small crowd, although not small compared t today's audiences. Ric, thanks for the memorie

UNSIGNED #124B: The whole SuperBrawl weekend was by far the most memorable time I have ever had as a wrestling fan. The whole experience. Arriving on Friday, I planned on going to dinner with Dave Meltzer, Ron Lemieux, Bruce Mitchell, John Hitchcock, Shannon Rose, Paul Spiegel, and a bunch of others, but we lost "the writers" in a torrential downpour on the way to eating Japanese. The group that was there rapped about wrestling until about 11:30, even though the restaurant closed at 10:00. I had a great conversation that night with a wrestler in our party who let me into the business in a way I had never seen and that was a real treat, especially since he had been to Japan twice.

Then there was the incredible Wrestle Fan convention on Saturday. Surprise one: I walked in at the same time as Ted DiBiase. What? At a WCW event? In living color and he stayed for a good twenty minutes. I guess when you're DiBiase you don't have to worry about the McMahon goons following you. Surprise two: Everybody shows up for the autograph session. Paul Spiegel did a great job in running the convention. Surprise three: Paul E. Dangerously, that punk Jason Hervey, and Missy Hyatt got into an insult match and while Missy and the wonder punk shot blanks, Paul E. bit their butts with every comeback. This was worth the trip alone.

The fun continued with a trip to Tampa's cable access channel and Shannon Rose's "Pro Wrestling Weekly" set. The crowd consisted of Scott Hudson, Obin Johnson, Alex Marvez, Klon, John Hitchcock, Nasty Ned (one of the nicest guys I have ever met), and a few others.

Rose hosted his show with a dapper Ron Lemieux. The first half of the show brought Meltzer, Mitchell, and Bowdren in their less-than-insider roles. Bowdren showed his adaptability and pulled off some sweet line about "he's the better scientific wrestler" referring to a SuperBrawl prediction and we all broke up. Their performance was followed by quick remarks from Klon and Marvez, and then Dangerously and Ross took over the stage and the laughs continued for the rest of the show. What a blast! But the day was not over yet as the indie card was coming up next.

These three hours were terrific as all of us "conventioneers" put on our best smart-ass caps and rode everyone the whole night. There was some little puke who could not have been more than eight years old, flipping the bird to Bowdren, Hitch and Mitch, andme. He must have a great set of parents.

The guys on the card had to put up with a lot of crap and, to their credit, they worked really hard. Except for that poor little lady Lou Perez, who took offense at some of our remarks. Po Wittle Woo!

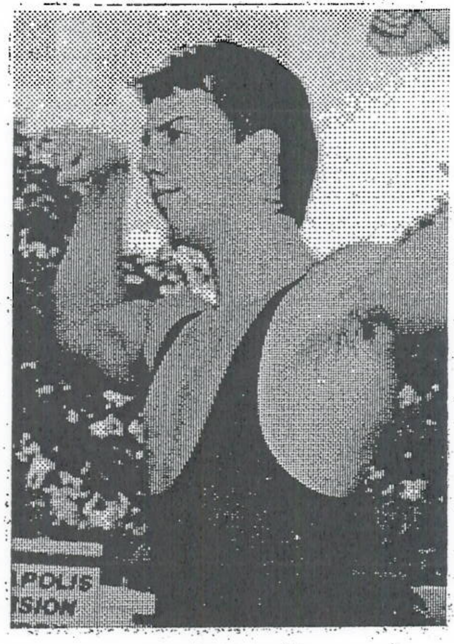
We do not get too many indies in L.A., so when I see one and have an idea how much they are making and what they are doing, I develop respect quickly. To put the final feather in the cap, "No Show Boy" Buddy Landel lost his map of Florida.

BRIAN F. SMITH (New London, CT): Looking over 20 years of fanaticism, it is tough to pick out one moment as a favorite. In reviewing two decades, a smile usually came to my face when I thought of a particular card and reflected, "Gee, we all had fun that night." but among my favorite stories...

I always thought Gary Michael Cappetta had one of the most annoying voices in broadcast history. Add to that, before national expansion, Howard Finkel used to share his wit and wisdom with we Connecticut hardcores. In 1985, at a Poughkeepsie TV taping, we were talking with Howard between shows, when a kid kept pestering the Fink for his autograph. Howard took the pen and paper and wrote in his neatest cursive: "Gary Michael Cappetta."

RYAN JONES (St. Paul, MN): Before the *Torch* and *Observer*, there was local wrestling radio and SNR, where I first heard about the PWA.

My first PWA card was an outdoor show at a shopping center. The best match was between two guys who I never heard of before. These two were The Lighting Kid and Jerry Lynn. Kid tried a flip off the top rope and landed on his back.



"LIGHTNING KID"

Then came my first PWA card at George's in Fridley, Minnesota which featured a four and a half star bout between Jerry Lynn and Ricky Rice. I saw a few more PWA cards after that which featured some good and some god-awful matches.

My memories about the PWA have been... Tommy Ferrara always being sick or hurt before his match, Lighting Kid's pre-match work with Wade and his highspots, the weird fans at Windom Park, the pissed fans after Rice turned face, any horrible angle with Kris Pope, Rice's facial expressions, the smoke at George's, our first reaction as we saw the "Roper's" sign in place of the old "George's" sign, the little guy in a tuxedo t-shirt who walked the wrestlers to and from the ring, acting like he was protecting them.

It's come a long way since Kid landed on his neck.

JASON SINGH (Vallego, CA): My most memorable moment came on August 25, 1987. The WWF was coming to the Cow Palace with a Hulk Hogan-Killer Khan main event. It turned out that the card was a TV taping. I was not privy to inside information at the time and had fun just watching the wrestlers from a short distance.

In the middle of the card, Mel Philips announced that Koko B. Ware would sing "Piledriver." He also said it would be taped for the music video along with Koko B. Ware's match with Barry Horowitz. The match was taped and out came Koko singing. He finished - or that's what we thought. Mel told us that they needed more reaction from the crowd. Half the crowd started laughing. Well, Koko sang again. After that, everyone around me sighed in relief. but wait, Mel said this time, "Let's try it one more time with some feeling." This time, the crowd was not laughing. We were all pissed-off because it was getting late. A security guard came and told everyone in the section to stand up and react. A lot of us reacted with, "Fuck you!" During the performance this time half of my section left. I got up and started "reacting" because I did not want to hear it again. But the funniest part was a kid around 10 years old next to me. He was screaming at his grandfather, "Get up Grandpa or he'll sing again!"

SCOTT SHERIFF (Easley, SC): In November of 1990, I made my debut as a pro wrestling referee. I work for a very small Anderson, SC based promotion that calls itself the IWA. Horace "Hoss" Strickland is the promoter, trainer, and owner. Mr. Strickland wrestled for many years as various masked villains such as one of the Infernos, one of the The Interns, and one of Jody Hamilton's Assassin partners. He has also trained some pretty good wrestlers like The Mod Squad.

My first match was in Colbert, Georgia, a very small rural town with some of the rowdiest, liveliest wrestling fans in the world. While I was going back and forth working the dressing rooms, I noticed the crowd was very into the matches, but they were not into the gentleman that was refereeing the first few matches. They did not like the way he was dressed, blue jeans, and a t-shirt, and they did not like the slow way he was refereeing.

When it was time for the semi-main event the other ref left the ring and went to the dressing room. When the announcer told the crowd it was time for the semi-main event, I came out of the dressing room and headed for the ring. I was dressed in black pants and a black and white stripped ref's shirt. The crowd was so pleased to have a new ref, they gave me a standing ovation. I was trying to keep a serious look on my face, but it was very hard considering it was going to be my first time in the ring and I was being welcomed like Hulk Hogan.

I was wandering around the ring while the announcer introduced me as Scott Christian (my "pro" name) and said I was from some place in North Carolina that I had never heard of before. The whole time some guy at ringside was hollering at me and began to annoy me. The announcer went on to say I was president of some Southeastern referee's association and this guy continued to bug me. I finally turned around and snapped "What!?!" at him. He could tell he was annoying me and was obviously pleased about it. He replied to me, "Excuse me! But did you know your pants aren't zipped?!?" Much to my dismay

> "The whole time some guy at ringside was hollering at me and began to annoy me. I finally turned around and snapped "What!?!" at him. He could tell he was annoying me and was obviously pleased about it. He replied to me, "Excuse me! But did you know your pants aren't zipped?!?" Much to my dismay, he wasn't kidding."

he was not kidding. I looked him in the eye, winked, and zipped my pants. While the challenger in the semi-main event was making his way to the ring, the promoter slipped over to the ring and whispered to me, "I am sure you will be pleased to know that I captured that memorable moment on video tape!" I smiled and told him, "Well, at least now I know why they all stood up and clapped for me!"

Another incident of similar embarrassment on someone elses part took place on June 18, 1991. Some friend and I ventured to the Civic Center in Anderson, South Carolina to see WCW TV tapings. This night it would be Lady Blossom who provided the most memorable moment.

LADY BLOSSOM

Lady Blossom and Stunning Steve made their way to the ring for a pretty lengthy squash match against one of the better jobbers. It is pretty much common knowledge that Lady Blossom is, shall we say, very generously endowed by nature. This night she was wearing a dress that will be difficult to describe. It was made of narrow straps of cloth that criss-crossed across her breasts.

In the process of performing her duties as manager and valet, the narrow strips of cloth on her right side must have thought Indians were about to attack, because they decided to circle the wagons. The result was an almost two inch hole exposing her partially.

During this time she was working the crowd pretty well and trying to help Stunning Steve cheat. When everyone finished laughing, most of the building started yelling at her trying to tell her she was exposed. She thought we were all yelling because she was doing a good job of drawing heat. She was obviously very pleased by the reaction she thought she was getting. It got really funny when WCW referee Nick Patrick noticed it and almost fell down laughing. Then the cameraman on the ring apron almost dropped his camera laughing. I believe it was Stunning Steve who finally made her understand the nature of the fans's reaction. After she covered the exposed area her facial expression revealed a secret desire to crawl under the ring and die. Her next two appearances at ringside this night were indeed "warmly" received.

JEFFREY COHEN (Great Neck, NY): In January 1991, I got to live a hardcore fantasy as I worked the concession stand at Herb Abrams's Universal Wrestling Federation show in West Islip, New York. I had been in contact with Herb for several months, and this was the time when the UWF was bringing its television tapings to Manhattan from California. I take this opportunity to confess that I am the one who put Abrams in touch with the management of the Queens Theater, which led to an explosive, disastrous first house show.

In any case, John Arezzi was co-running the second Wrestling Fans's Convention at the Royce Hotel and I showed up to meet with Herb about getting involved in the UWF. I wound up selling photos for a couple of hours as the convention wound down. Then Herb convinced me to come out to the West Islip show. It was not difficult - he said I would get limoed out with the other talent.

Sure enough, I was put in a limo with Steve Rey, Brian Blair, and Paul Orndorff. For a man who had lived and died with the WWF from 1984 to 1986, I imagined this as a once in a lifetime experience.

To make a long story short, after the show, which drew 600 fans, I took a limo back to the Royce with Mr. and Mrs. Abrams. We talked about the business. Herb commented that the name change from NWA to WCW would doom the Turner-owned promotion. Abrams invited me to the convention room where he was throwing a surprise birthday party for Brian Blair.

Among the wrestling crew who showed up to pay their respects (and get their checks), were Bob Orton, Steve Williams, David Sammartino, Col. DeBeers, Greg Valentine, Honkeytonk Man, Lou Spiccoli, Ivan Koloff, and John Tolos.

Tolos shook Blair's hand and asked how old he was. After Blair responded, Tolos said he wished Brian and his wife a lifetime of happiness.

"I'll be happy if I live to be as old as you doing what I'm doing," Blair said. "Incidentally, John, how old are you?"

The Golden Greek smiled. "I'm sixty," Tolos said.

"Sixty?" Abrams's cousin, Steve, said. "I heard John Tolos was 70."

"Seventy?" Herb gasped. "I heard he was older than that."

Taking my life into my own hands, I quipped, "Who's John Tolos?"

The room broke up. Tolos turned to face me, as he had been right in front of me when I made the remark. The future "Coach" would now seal my fate.

He grinned from ear to ear and said, "Watch yourself buddy," as he slapped my shoulder.

As I drove off into the cold Queens night, I pondered the events that had brought me to the Royce. I had met Don Muraco, an idol of my youth. I had met Ox Baker in all his arthritic glory. If I never had the chance again to be in such distinguished company, I now had fond memories. Ah, memories, soft spinebreakers in the back of my medulla oblongata. It began to snow.

ERIC KROL (Orland Hills, IL): One of my most memorable wrestling moments was the first NWA show I ever attended in early October 1988. I had just been introduced to the wrestling newsletters two months earlier when I responded to a newspaper classified which promised "inside info" on pro wrestling. The person who placed the ad was a fellow named Lance Levine, who in October of 1988 was putting out a fledgling sheet called Chokehold, which had turned into one of the top five in my opinion.

I was still pretty green then as I was actually excited to see the Flair vs. Luger main event. This was the first time around the horn for this match after the famous Baltimore commission ending. A friend from Detroit had sent results from a September show so I knew the screwjob ending they were running. Tully and Arn had just jumped to Titan and I was pretty excited about this new side of wrestling I was getting into. The only things that really stand out in my mind about the card was Rick Steiner's antics as he was on the verge on turning face (it seemed like he was on the verge for six months), a reunion of the Texas Outlaws, Dusty Rhodes and Dustin's real daddy, Dick Murdoch against The Midnights, which was my first up-close blade job as Rhodes hit a gusher. Oh, I was de-virginized to the screwjob ending. I actually thought Lex had a chance because there was a PWA photog there. Lest we forget, the ref was bumped, Lex dumped Flair over the top rope, and eventually pinned him with a sunset flip as the second ref counted. Well, of course the first ref saw the DQ.

I had a great time meeting Lance Levine. But there is a funny side to this. Mr. Levine could tell I was still pretty green (he was probably right). I noticed Bears's fullback Brad Muster in the first row. I pointed to a curly-haired, muscular guy who was standing next to Brad and I asked Levine who it was. Levine just said, "Oh, he's just a friend of Brad's."

Well, it turned out to be the guru himself, Dave Meltzer. Geez, what a "friend" for Brad to have.

BOB BARNETT (Santa Monica, CA): Seeing Bruno Sammartino on the beach at Waikiki in 1974. I had only seen him from the balconies at the old Madison Square Garden in

1960-61 before moving to California, and he was much shorter and wider up close. He refused my offer to try surfing.

Being front row at the HIC Honolulu in 1974 for my first Terry Funk match versus the Sheik, Ed Farhat. I had not seem Mr. Farhat since 1961 in New York when he regularly beat the "Jewish Champion from New Zealand," Abe Jacobs. I was not ready for the amount of juice that Terry contributed to the proceedings; lots of it on my clothes. When he was carried out, I felt like what Mark Madden wrote in his debut "You May Not Like It..." column, disbelieving for a second that what I had just seen was a work.

Later, Billy Graham dominated Verne before inevitably doing the job. But since the boys were always happy to be in Surf City, Superstar kept up a steady stream of one liners to the ringside fans and crew where the seats were right up against the ring. A great night of laughs and juice.

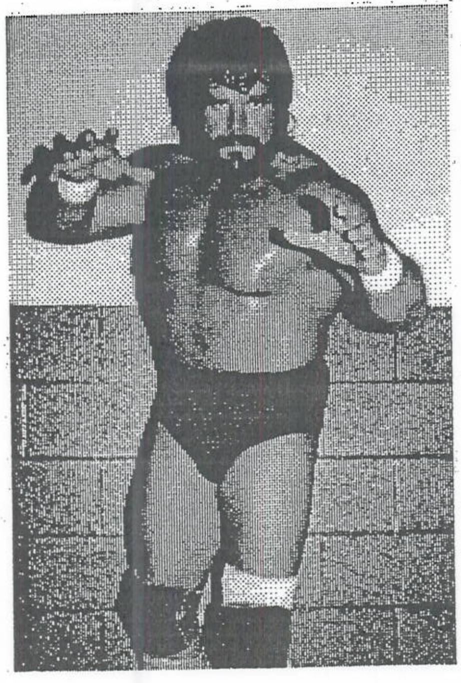
R. KRAEMER: I flew to Charlotte, North Carolina for the first Great American Bash. July 4th weekend of 85! At that time, I didn't realize there were so many other hardcore fans around or newsletters either.

Anyway, I will always remember what happened before the main event of Ric Flair vs Nikita Koloff. Flair flew into the outdoor stadium in a local radio station helicopter. The 25,000 fans in attendance let out a roar I have only heard at Giant football games when the copter cruised the stadium once, landed, and then Flair stepped onto the field. An exciting moment in wrestling I'll always remember.

> "I will always remember what happened before the main event of Ric Flair vs Nikita Koloff. Flair flew into the outdoor stadium in a local radio station helicopter. The 25,000 fans in attendance let out a roar I have only heard at Giant football games when the copter cruised the stadium once, landed, and then Flair stepped onto the field."

IAN GOODWIN (Brooklyn, NY): At a WWF Madison Square Garden show in March of this year, there was one moment where the only two people in the whole arena clapping for Slaughter were Adnon and myself. I nearly got into a fight with a drunk fan for this.

At the July 3 Meadowlands Bash, Steve Austin challenged a fan to jump the rail and get in the ring with him. Anger filled the guy's eyes. Everybody around him, myself included, encouraged him to do it. Finally, security got him back to his seat. At this point, Austin laughed at the fan. Also at the Meadowlands, after Tom Zenk took a bump over the rail, he looked up and in an almost sarcastic tone, said, "Ouch."



STEVE "DR. DEATH" WILLIAMS

Besides the "We Want Flair" chants at the Baltimore Bash were "Dustin Sucks" chants my brother and I started. Soon, a whole section had joined in. At this point, a heavily made-up face fan looked at me in disgust and frustration. God, do I hate Dusty Rhodes.

The Herb Abrams UWF tapings at the Hotel Pennsylvania usually ran four or five hours. They usually brought out the most rowdy in hardcore fans. The longer the taping is, the more fans leave. Only the rowdiest fans are left. As Abrams interviewed Steve Williams and Terry Gordy, many chanted, "Best up Herb!" At the first taping, there was a pretty big guy named Stan who stood up the entire evening, yelling at and challenging wrestler. He did not even stop to breathe. One after the other, the insults and challenges would come. About the only wrestler who really seemed serious was Williams. This guy must be pretty tough because I do not know of anybody who could back up what they say to somebody like Williams.

After Cactus Jack and Williams, the most over wrestler at the UWF tapings was a preliminary wrestlers named the Beast. The longer the show went, the more popular he became. "We want the Beast!" and "The Beast rules!" chants could be heard. Soon, the masked wrestler, who does have some talent, began to play to the crowd. "We Want Beast" t-shirts and "We Want Beast" videos topped all other chants. For that day, whoever he is, the Beast must have felt like Hulk Hogan.

FRED COOPER (Richmond, VA): In the late 60s and early 70s I was a teenager who followed NWA wrestling from the Cow Palace in San Francisco. My favorite wrestler was Ray Stevens. In my local town, once a year they had a benefit for the March of Dimes at the Bowling Alley. Bay Area sportswriter celebs usually showed up and bowled to help out. Jockeys, football and baseball stars, and sometimes wrestlers. This was the time before automatic scorekeepers. I signed up and received a pair of lanes by the luck of the draw. Scorekeeping for change was how I picked up a couple of bucks spending money. Imagine my surprise when I drew the pair of lanes where Ray Stevens, Ripper Collins, and Buddy Atkisson Sr. were three of the celebrities. Man, I was in heaven. Buddy Atkisson was involved in roller derby. He was the coach of the local heavy team, kind of like a manager in wrestling. Anyway, I got to meet Collins and Stevens. I was not much interested in meeting Collins. I did talk to Stevens. He caught me looking at his cauliflower ear.

"Hey kid, you see something I don't?"

"No," I replied, meekly.

"That's okay. I know it look like a spit-out piece of gum," he answered.

I was a better bowler than he and he asked me how to pick up a spare or two. What elation! He's 5-9, 230 lbs., with a 22 inch neck, bleached blond crew-cut, talked out of the side of his mouth like The Crusher, lived in Honolulu, and told me he was going to breed bulldogs for a living after he retired from wrestling. They both tipped me a fiver.

If you can believe it, I never spent them! They are still in a frame and autographed. I asked to carry Stevens's bowling ball to his car for him. He said, "That's okay, kid."

He called me that all night. I was 18. When he left, he said, "Thanks kid, see ya at the matches." I didn't sleep too well that night. Stevens and Pat Patterson are my two favorite wrestlers of all time.

GEORGE MARANVILLE: My favorite memory from the by-gone days of good wrestling is from the Poffo's old ICW promotion based here in Lexington, Kentucky.

Contrary to the popular misconception, the South, at least here in Kentucky, is far from a hotbed of wrestling. Since the solid days of Jarrett's Memphis promotion through the seventies (doesn't that seem like a millennium ago) this area has been dead.

At that time a renegade group of wrestlers started a promotion here in Lexington. In order to compete with the established Memphis circuit they tried every conceivable (and inconceivable) angle in the book to increase their houses.

One such angle took place at Henry Clay High School in front of a guesstimated crowd of 200. Following a match between The Great Tio and some scrub whose name escapes me, Tio bolted out of the ring, grabbed the teenager sitting front row ringside beside me, and dragged him into the ring. As Tio's chokehold appeared to get tighter, the kid turned a bluer shade of blue. By this time, half the ringsiders in attendance stormed the ring trying to help him. Pez Whatley, a heel at the time, came out of the dressing room and cleared the entire ring so Tio could continue his assault.

Crowd and wrestler confrontations were nothing unusual in the ICW; George Weingeroff's statement on weekly television, "Here we have a fan who tried to get involved in the action, we hate to see that happen," certainly would have been sufficient for the all-cliche team had it existed at the time.

Sitting on the other side of me, with the same terror-stricken look on his face, was Jeff, my best friend and a state amateur wrestling champion. Every redneck in the place was screaming at him, "Yer pretty good size, git in there and help that fella."

"I think not," said Jeff, pointedly.

The high school gymnasium was in an absolute frenzy. Eventually, the ring was cleared and an ambulance was dispatched. The ERU workers put a neck brace on the teen and a funeral procession-like wave followed the stretcher as it was wheeled out to the parking lot where the ambulance turned on its sirens and flashing lights and tore into the night. Creepy stuff indeed... and we were barely half way through the card.

It was not until the next week on television that we found out that the brutalized young man was none other than George Weingeroff's "brother," just a fan who came to see his older sibling wrestle.

For all the suspension of disbelief inherent in wrestling, a fan sometimes has that rare and wonderfully frightening occurrence when he's trying to convince himself that a particular angle is not real. Those experiences, unfortunately, are as exceptional as a four-star WWF match these days, and just as rare.

GARY SKYBYRG: My all time favorite moment was a tossup between a wrestling event a few years back and a wrestling event that occurred a few months ago. A couple of years ago at the L.A. Sports Arena, it was a memorable moment for Roddy Piper who was appearing in his very last match in L.A. before his one year retirement to film the movie, "They Live." He appeared as a part of a tag team amongst four other good guy wrestlers against four wrestling heels. The wrestlers who get pinned have to go back to the dressing room. The heels only lost one wrestler, but Roddy Piper lost all of his tag team partners. He had to go against Harley Race, Greg Valentine, and Randy Savage. However, Roddy Piper must have been psyched up for this confrontation as he wrestled an inspiring performance. One by one, Piper eliminated each of his opponents and came out victorious in an extraordinary exhibition.

I believe there is no wrestler more popular in L.A. than Hulk Hogan. Every time that I have seen him at the L.A. Sports Arena, he mesmerized the people as he entered the ring and then he puts on a show for the public after he becomes victorious. However, it was recently at the Anaheim Convention Center, which is not very far from the L.A. area, that gave me the ultimate validation of Hulk Hogan's tremendous popularity in the Southern California area. Bret Hart, one of the last two participants in the battle royal, not only had to face Sgt. Slaughter in the ring, but he also had to comfort Col. Mustafa and General Adnon outside of the ring. Mustafa and Adnon were eliminated earlier from the battle royal along with everyone else with the exception of Slaughter and Hart. However, the crowd throughout the Anaheim Convention Center did not appreciate Col. Mustafa and General Adnon assisting Sgt. Slaughter at ringside, and they did not at all like the unfair advantage that Slaughter had over Hart. So the entire Anaheim Convention Center crowd started chanting, "Hogan, Hogan, Hogan!" Hogan raced to the ring and took on Mustafa and Adnon. Hart immediately kicked Slaughter out of the ring to become the winner of the battle royal.

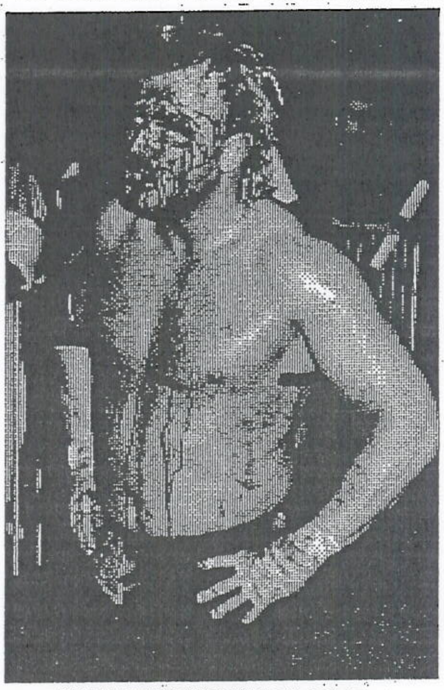
Piper's performance along with the loud chants of "Hogan!" were two extraordinarily memorable moments.

J.D. MCKAY: I have several memorable moments as a fan of pro wrestling, including meeting greats such as Lou Thesz, Cowboy Bill Watts, Ted DiBiase before he "inherited all the millions," Jerry Lawler, and others. I truly respect and admire Boyd Pierce, who was really super to Myrna Lynn and myself at the first UAWF con-fab in Memphis. The time I spent with him was really special..

Also, when I used to do *Ringside Reflector* newsletter, interviewing Paul E. Dangerously and Chris Cruise were real thrills. And the steak cook-out with Wendall Cooley, Tom Prichard, Don "Stomper" Harris, Lou Fabiano, and Terry Fronson was great, too.

Being involved in an angle or two for Central All-Star in Tupelo was great and having the the legendary Exotic Adrian Street and wife, Miss Linda, staying over for a night was awesome. Taking a back bodydrop from CWF wrestler, Mike Seavers, in Acherman. The list is really endless, and I hope it never ends, but there is one most memorable moment which lasted two hours in the fall of 1988.

My wife and I had gone to an NWA card in Greenwood, Miss. one night and talked to Missy Hyatt. She invited us to have dinner the next night in Jackson, Miss. with her and her husband at the time, Eddie Gilbert. My thoughts were, "Oh yeah, sure. It'll never happen."


"HOT STUFF" EDDIE GILBERT

THE ROAD WARRIORS

"But it did. My wife, Eddie, Missy, and I for over two hours in Bennigan's restauran Jackson, Miss. Eddie bought Buffalo wings ranch dressing and Miller Lites. Missy talke her dreams of becoming a fashion designer huge shopping mall. I'm not sure this is what called, but it is the person who does the set- and mannequins and P-O-P advertising department sores.

Eddie Gilbert spoke of his dreams recruiting the First Family of Wrestling, at time Sting, Rick Steiner, Scott Steiner, Mi Hyatt, and himself. He spoke of his Mid-So days with Bill Watts and how good the stuff back then.

It is three years later and I continue to both of them the best. I appreciate the time shared.

BRUCE GRUMMERT (Lincoln, NE): favorite memories are from watching Geo Championship Wrestling on Saturday nights Gordon Solie. I remember the early days of Flair, who I really hated at the time. The R Warriors and Junkyard Dog were the top star couldn't wait until my chance to see these and other top wrestlers on a big show and during second week of February it was announced th supershow was coming to Kansas City, Miss at Kemper Arena.

March 4, 1984 in front of nearly 15, fans, I watched a main event cage match special referee Terry Funk with Bruiser Br vs. Kamala. I was going crazy because I wa to see Brody kick Kamala's butt. There was of blood as Funk acted like a wild maniac in cage, including shoving Brody around the r Suddenly, Funk surprised everyone by turning Brody. He and Kamala just beat the living out of Brody. By this time, fans were tryin climb over the barricade, but security stop them. It was out of control. Funk was bleed heavily. Brody ran out of the cage and th chairs and tables everywhere. A classic br and bloodbath.

Other matches included my first look at Road Warriors. The Roadies teamed with Cr Luke Graham against Junkyard Dog & B Sawyer & Wahoo McDaniel. More blood. I thought "awesome" when looking at the Road

But the main event was Ric Flair vs. Ha Race for the NWA World Title. The match to a classic one hour draw that I will never for The show started at 2 p.m. and ended four h later.

That card is still the best I have ever see

HOW PAY-PER-VIEW WORKS

THE BIGGEST SOURCE OF REVENUE FOR PRO WRESTLING EXAMINED AND EXPLAINED

BY PAUL J. MACARTHUR

In 1972, Home Box Office, the first successful pay television service was launched. HBO used a simple formula: uncut, unedited, uninterrupted movies and sporting events were presented for a nominal monthly fee to cable subscribers. The fee, determined by the cable operators, but not below a mutually agreed upon minimum rate, was split fifty-fifty between HBO and the cable operator. HBO's chances for even minimal success seemed slim as previously the practice of charging an extra fee for one channel had never been successfully accomplished in the cable industry. Today, HBO is one of the largest sources of profit for Time-Warner Inc. and has diversified itself from a middleman for the cable operator and Hollywood studios to that of movie producer, pay cable programmer, concert promoter, theater exhibitor, and home video producer.

Since the debut of HBO, numerous cable off-air subscription television services have been introduced. The most successful include HBO's sister service, Cinemax, and Showtime, The Movie Channel, Disney, and Bravo. Off-air subscription services, popular in metropolitan areas that were not wired, have faded from the scene as cable has penetrated more and more major cities. Although pay television services are subject to high churn rates, they are one of the most successful offerings in the cable television industry. Presently, 29 percent of all television households subscribe to at least one pay service.

Had cable television failed, it is doubtful pay television would have ever become successful. Had pay television failed, pay-per-view would never have gotten off the ground. And the current wrestling business would be a lot different.

Prior to the introduction of HBO, cable subscribers paid a flat monthly rate for their cable service. When HBO and subsequent competing services became successful, the cable operator was able to create a mind-set that paying additional fees each month for one or two channels was acceptable. Subsequently, the cable operator was able to expand this idea into the realm of pay-per-view, where the customer pays an additional fee, not for one month of an additional channel, but for one program. Now, the practice of paying an additional charge, sometimes in excess of the monthly charge for basic service or a pay channel, for one movie, concert, or sporting event has become common and successful.

The origins of PPV date back to Zenith's off air television service called Phonevision. This first attempt to develop a PPV television used baseball games and predated the introduction of cable television to all but the smallest communities. Phonevision, about 40 years ahead of itself in terms of marketability, failed. Numerous attempts to develop a PPV service were initiated, but few had any success. The most common and most successful PPV services were run by individual cable operators who would obtain movies from major and not-so-major studios. They would then cablecast the movie on one of their open channels, using a scrambler to prevent unauthorized access to the movie. Subscribers could then order the movie, have it de-scrambled, and then have a predetermined charge added to their bill. The success of pay-cable and the local cable operators relative success with their own PPV channels paved the way for the introduction of four major PPV satellite services in 1985 when PPV became a steady reality on cable.

There are two major PPV services and a number of minor ones. The two most important ones are Viewer's Choice and Request TV (RTV). While both provide PPV service, they operate quite differently. Viewer's Choice licenses movies, concerts, entertainment specials - like the Bikini Open - and sporting events from the producer of PPV event. Authorized cable systems then receive the event off satellite, transmit it to their subscribers, and those wishing to receive the event purchase it. The revenue from the event is then divided in a three-way split with the cable operator receiving fifty percent, the program supplier forty-plus percent, and Viewer's Choice the remainder. Request TV obtains its programming in a slightly different fashion. Rather than acting as a middleman, licensing films and taking a cut of the PPV profit pie, RTV sells satellite time to programmers who then decide what movies or events they want to run on the service. RTV then distributes the event to cable operators in the same fashion as Viewer's Choice. Revenue is divided between the cable operator and the programmer with a 55/45 split favoring the cable operator.

The actual distribution of a major wrestling event, from the arena to the cable subscriber's home, is rather simple. However, if there is one glitch at any point in the transmission process, the event will not make it to the subscriber's home.. Titan Sports or Turner Home Entertainment has outside of the arena a portable satellite unit that scrambles and transmits the actual program from the arena to either Viewer's Choice or RTV's satellite transporter (usually both as all wrestling PPV events are carried by Viewer's Choice and RTV). From there, the satellite signal is transmitted to the cable operators and some dish owners. Authorized cable operators have a decoder programmed to de-scramble the signal so they can assign the signal to one of their channels using the modulator, scramble it, and send it out through the system.

Once the signal has been scrambled, the only way a subscriber can view it is by using an addressable converter or a bootleg de-scrambler. Since bootleg scramblers are illegal, lets concentrate on addressable converters. The addressable converter is controlled by a computer system at the cable company's headend. Each addressable converter, identified in the computer system by a prom number, is authorized, or told what it is allowed to do by the computer system. For example, at the headend, the computer system can shut off an addressable converter because the subscriber has not paid his bill. The result is the converter no longer transmits the signals it receives to the subscriber's television and he receives static on all of his channels. This event is assigned a tag number. When a subscriber orders a PPV event, that tag number is authorized on his converter and he is able to receive the event. The next event will have a different tag number, and unless the subscriber orders the next event, his converter will either show a scrambled picture or a text screen when the event is over.

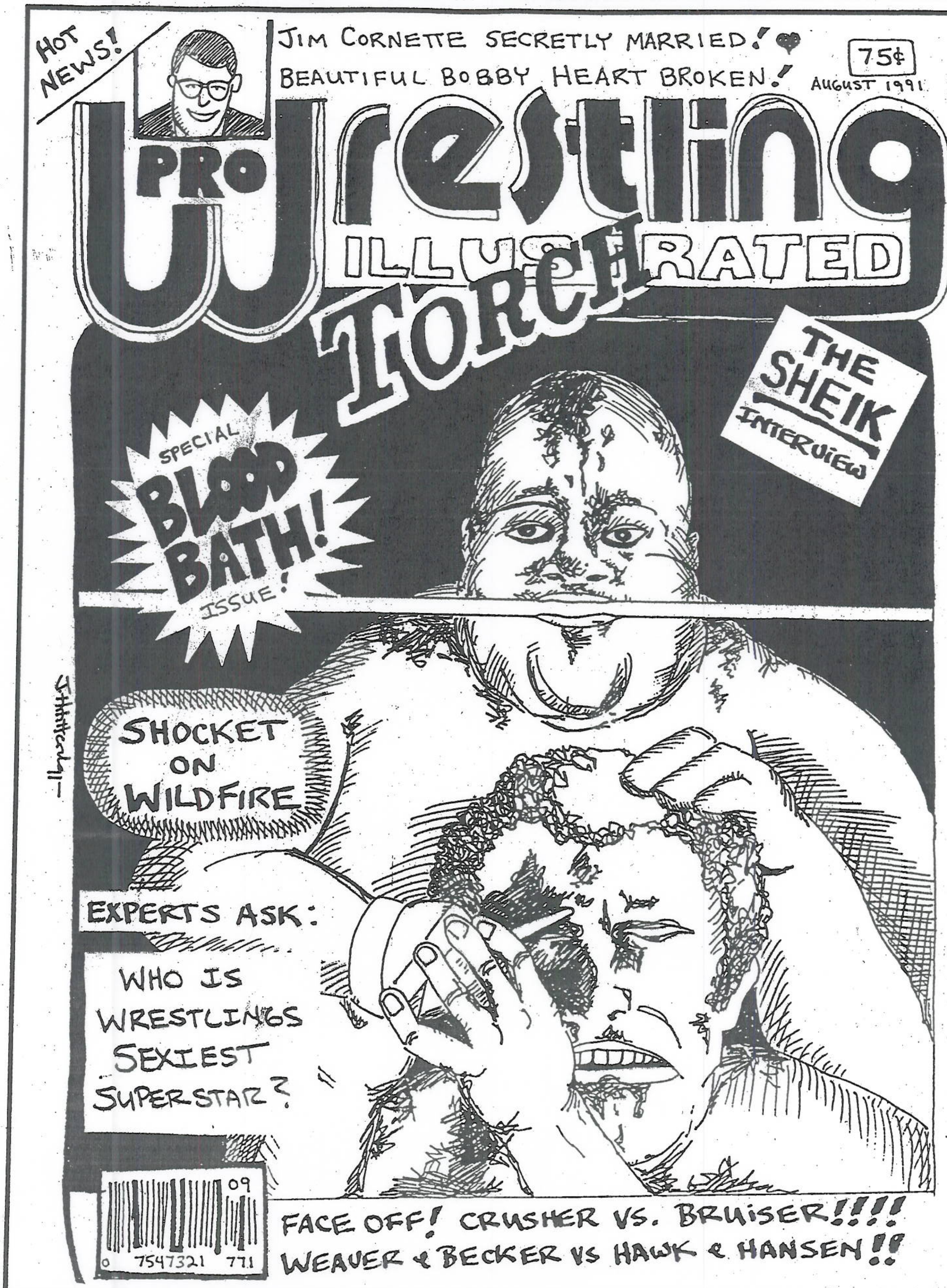
There are different methods of ordering pay-per-view events, although the systems that allow impulse ordering are the fastest, most efficient systems and they generate a significantly higher buy rate than CSR systems - in some cases as much as 200 percent higher buyrates. However, the number of systems with such sophistication are in the minority.

The advent of PPV has provided the cable subscriber the option of paying $30 for three hours of Wrestlemania when their normal monthly bill, including one pay service, is often less than that. In 1992, many of NBC's summer Olympic events will be broadcast on PPV and there are already some major league baseball teams that have PPV contracts, which is great if one only wants to watch a Ranger game Nolan Ryan pitches. The Minnesota North Stars pioneered having hockey playoff home games on PPV instead of on commercial-TV and it was a smashing success, with up to five times as many fans watching on PPV as attended the arena live. Such expansion could threaten wrestling's stranglehold on PPV and reduce the number of buys of wrestling events based strictly on it being a unique way to view a special event. Plus, the more money that is spent on Olympics and baseball and hockey, the less money is available for pro wrestling.

PPV has grown tremendously over the past six years with the help of Vince McMahon who got in on the ground floor and exploited the medium and then made the major mistake of combatting the same people who helped make his PPV's so profitable. McMahon, as observant as he is, was unable to see cable operators would remain loyal to their consistent suppliers, not someone who provides four or five PPV events a year. Thus, his 1990 battle to rid himself of Viewer's Choice was ineffective. As much as PPV has grown over the past six years, its potential is limited as it faces limited viewing time, limited consumer dollars, and new competing product offerings.

PPV will remain a source of revenue for cable operators and wrestling promoters, but because it is so expensive, it is the more vulnerable to economic trends. Resultantly, cable operators will use PPV to generate income, but they will never count on it as their major source of revenue. Wrestling promoters would be well-served to do the same.

[Paul MacArthur works as a marketing manager for a corporate cable office and has a Masters Degree in Communications. He also edits and publishes an essay-oriented newsletter called Wrestling Perspective at $1.00 per monthly issue from P.O. Box 410, Camillus, NY 13031-0401.]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DAN SHOCKET:
BODYSLAMS AND WORMSLIME

An Appreciation of a Pioneer Journalist

By Bruce Mitchell

I thought the column that appeared in the March 1980 issue pretty much summed up what I wanted this column to come to mean. This was probably the first column that established the sensibility and rhythm that I hoped would appear.

Notice: This column will print no more letters proclaiming the virtues of Ricky Steamboat. Everyone knows what I think of the clumsy coward, and it seems I've read the idiotic drivel from every one of his fans. Enough. The fans of Rick Steamboat will have to find someone else to laugh over their foolishness.

Dear Mr. Shocket (I think),

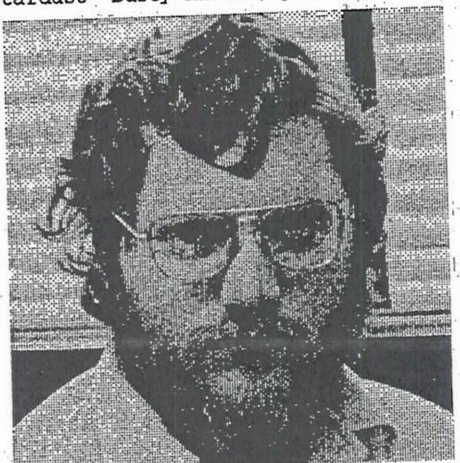
You have put down scientific wrestlers long enough. I double dare you to step into the squared circle with "Stardust" Dusty Rhodes, you creep. If you don't chicken out, I would like an article and photographs of the match. Good luck, if you accept the bout, you geek.

Don Theriault
Washburn, ME

Dear Mr. Theriault,

Living in Maine, I suppose you do get desperate for any reading matter, even a match between me and Rhodes. However, I have a better idea. I challenge Dusty to write a coherent sentence without the words "baby" and "fans." I will happily print this prose, or at least the photograph of him trying to write it.

-Dan Shocket; Best of Off the Top Rope, PWI Annual, Spring 1983.



DAN SHOCKETT

After several beery weekend late nights of watching Mid-Atlantic wrestling on a small black and white TV in the dorm during the late seventies, I finally decided to attend a live card at the Greensboro Coliseum. One of the appalling highlights of the evening occurred during a tag match pitting Ray Stevens and Greg Valentine against the Jones "cousins," S.D. and Rufus.

Valentine and Stevens were on their way to the NWA World Tag Team Titles. S.D. was on a several year track of boring fans up and down the Eastern seaboard and Rufus was on a trail that would lead to a security guard job at the dog track. As this uneventful match wore on to its inevitable conclusion, one loud-mouthed kid began to regale everyone in my section with his opinions on the match, specifically how S.D. could have found a better partner like Tony Atlas to help him become a champion. The match was not very exciting so the guy had plenty of to bore everyone around him and he worked himself into a babbling frenzy. The kid started bounding up and down the metal stairs - Bong! Bong! Bong! Parents in my section were beginning to question each other. Is that your child? No one was claiming this nuisance as their own.

The match ended as the attendant entered the ring to make some announcement. He plugged a card coming to the Winston-Salem Coliseum that featured the Mid-Atlantic debut of some guy named "Tommy Rich."

This seemingly innocuous announcement sent the kid into an absolute tizzy. He started screaming at the top of his lungs, "TOMMY WILDFIRE RICH IS COMIN' TO DA CAROLINAS!" over and over again. He ran right up to the top of the section and then sprinted straight down to ringside, babbling the entire time "WILDFIRE TOMMY RICH IS COMIN' TO DA CAROLINAS." The entire sectio watched in shock and amazement as this ki started doing laps around the ring. By now, th security was starting to take notice of thi lunatic. They started to chase the kid all ove ringside, but they had a hard time catching hi because he began sliding around and deliverin elbow drops on the concrete.

After watching that little scenario unfold, had only one question: Who the hell w "Wildfire Tommy Rich?"

Since I was a poor cableless college stude there was only one way to find out. I certain did not have any friends who were wrestling fa to ask and there were definitely no newslette like the *Torch* to read, so I had to listen to so convenience store clerk snicker as I bought a f of those bloody Victory Sports Series magazin After all, they promised they were "T Magazines That Ripped the Lid Off P Wrestling!" These magazines introduced me t mondo-bizzaro world of noble Brunos a traitorous Zbyszkos, of monsters who dripp blood like Abdullah and The Sheik, of f young athletes like Backlund and Gagne, and noble warriors who laid their lives on the line the "integrity" of the sport like Mr. Wrestlin and Dusty Rhodes.

The magazines at that time were combination of action and posed shots wrestlers mugging for the cameras superfluous words that filled the extra space, were only occasionally and accident accurate. Bill Apter's "What's Happeni feature was probably the most informative a quickly learned to decode entries like "P Morales is on a win streak in the Carolinas. mean "Pedro is in this area but loses to all the stars." The Rumor/Fact section was particul memorable when they straightened out pernicious rumor that The Grand Wizard h Greg Valentine robot that could feel no pai the time they denied that the reason Ma Superstar wore a mask was because he w space alien. Of course, they left open possibility that Superstar was an escapee fro institution for the criminally insane. An great rumor that they squelched was that Mascaras and El Canek were somehow bro Unfortunately, that rumor turned out to be t

Matt Brock, the obviously fictional gri veteran reporter with the phoney portrait every column, travelled all over the cont philosophizing about scientific and rulebre wrestlers, but never seemed to get any sort of real story, probably because the magazine editors only had photos to go on in creating stories for the various territories.

The interviews were obviously phony and the quotes in the "Capsule Profile" could be pretty weird. I remember in particular one "Profile" on Pat Patterson where two thirds of the quotes were lyrics from Bob Dylan songs. The magazines were obviously put together cheaply and on the run. They could be a lot of fun if you did not take them seriously.

Or so I thought until I read this:

"There were three men condemned to the lowest rung of hell in the epic poem, "Inferno," by Dante. This was where the three most despised traitors in history suffered through eternity. There is now a fourth traitor who has earned a place with these hated men. Judas, Cassius, Brutus: Welcome Tony Garea.

-Dan Shocket, Bodyslams and Pinfalls, February 1984.

Here was something different.

"Bodyslams & Pinfalls" and its companion question and answer column, "Off the Top Rope," were something of a revelation. Often acerbic, literate, and funny, these columns demonstrated that wrestling writing could be smart indeed. Shocket created his own wrestling reality where hard, principled men sped down roads and stayed in no-tell motels to practice their craft for corrupt promoters and boorish uncaring fans at little pay. The wrestlers who sold out for cheers and money were successful while better athletes with integrity had to suffer in relative silence. While Shocket's column never really broke the "kayfabe" (an old carny term meaning "acknowledgement of the inner-workings of the business," be it pro wrestling or carnival acts) laws and like the rest of the magazine were pretty much fabricated from whole cloth they had an underlying truth to them concerning the nature of the sport.

PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED'S TRIBUTE TO DAN SHOCKET:

"1985 EDITOR'S AWARD"

"Dan was one of the msot creative minds behind the founding of PWI (Pro Wrestling Illustrated) six years ago. Before that, he had been instrumental in guiding the development of our entire family of wrestling magazines... He was, simply, one of hte most talented writers working on any magazine anywhere...

"...He hated the thought of anyone fooling the fans, be it magazine publishers, wrestling promotoers, or the wrestlers themselves. And the only time he disliked the fans was when he felt they ere allowing themselves to be fooled. It was this sort of unbending idealism that made his "Off the Top Rope" column so controversial and so entertaining.

"Dan Shocket was a pioneer in bringing respectability to the job of wrestling journalist. He made all who followed him proud ot be a part of this profession. he did it with his work, which shone with wit, itelligence, and honest. And he did it with the way he lived and died, which was truly courageous exhibition of human bravery. For this reason, Dan Shocket is honored posthumonously with the 1985 Editors' Award."

-Excertps from *PWI*, March 1986.

Bill Apter, Senior Editor of London Publishing magazines recalls the impact of Shocket's work. "After one of his columns would appear attacking a particular fan favorite, we could count on receiving a stack of letters protesting its content only a few days after the issue hit the newsstands," says Apter. "Wrestlers who were the objects of his attacks called me on several occasions and were angry because they felt that he had gone too far. I can't really name the wrestlers because several of them are still active and we still work with them, but I can say that on a few occasions, wrestlers would have liked to do something physical about Shocket. His column, however, was the most popular feature of the magazine among our readers. It consistently got more response than any other feature in our magazines."

How did Shocket become a heel columnist? "I believe he sent us a resume after attending college in upstate New York," says Apter. "At first (the early 70s), he wrote articles no different from the rest of the magazine, but I noticed that he kept putting in little shots to the scientific wrestlers," says Apter. "I finally told him he should do an entire column that way. It was his method and not mine, because it was obvious that was what he enjoyed the most.

"He liked Superstar Billy Graham with the Grand Wizard best of all the rulebreakers and he hated Bruno (Sammartino) the most. He used to watch the wrestling shows and assume the characters of the wrestlers. He attended matches at Madison Square Garden and the Nassau Coliseum, but it got to where some fans recognized him. He was a shy man and he wasn't comfortable with the personal notoriety , so he stopped going to the matches.

"He probably would have been horrified at the direction it has taken today, with all the clownish, circus aspects of the business now. He would not have enjoyed the emphasis on entertainment as opposed to the sports aspect of wrestling.

"He had a quick wit. I remember at one of the conventions we were asked to do a couple of panels. I did one on photography and Dan did one on writing. Someone stood up and was really upset at something he had written. He calmly and in a few words answered that person in such a way that everyone in the room was laughing. Dan was a nice guy and a true gentleman."

Eddie Elner, whose "Insider" column carries on the tradition Dan Shocket established, remembers the man.

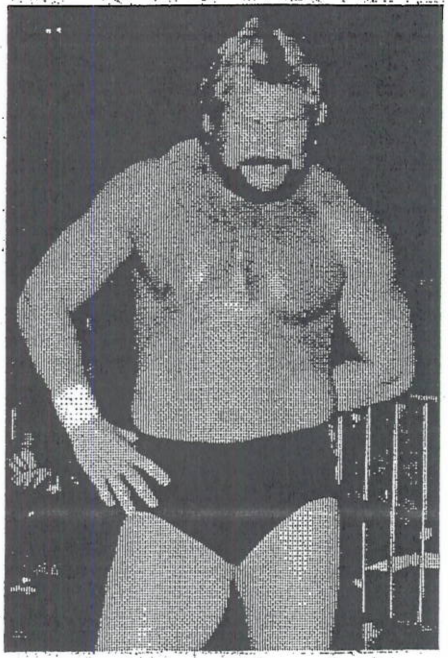
"He lived the life of a rogue, an underground artist, a ladies man.," says Elner "He was a role model for me in a lot of ways. I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for Dan Shocket. It's not that I'm sitting in Dan's seat necessarily; it's really a state of mind and I owe this to Dan. He was a wonderful person... The reaction to the columns from the readers was a gut reaction. He taught me not to sidestep an issue, to attack the readers, to pull them out o their complacency. He was a good guy jus trying to do his job. The only non-wrestlin work I know of is some soft porn magazines h did. Like I said, he was something of a underground character."

Eddie is some kind of character, too. Whe I asked him what it was like to follow Da Shocket, he said, in a deadpan voice "...Hard...He was an elusive guy..."

The elusive guy had a vision of professiona wrestling that was unique in a time whe absolutely no one was examining the sport on national basis and the old line promoters ha their own way. That is not to say that Da Shocket reported behind-the-scenes stories o even supported the wrestlers that were goo workers. He particularly seemed to hate Te DiBiase and when DiBiase appeared in the Mid South area; he had a hard time accepting it. H wrote two or three different columns depictin DiBiase as a man in agony and predicting h would turn good again...

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS by Dan Shocket

It's no fun being around Ted DiBiase The man is consumed by demons I'm gratefu I'll never know. Fate forced him t become a rulebreaker. There was never man less suited for the task.

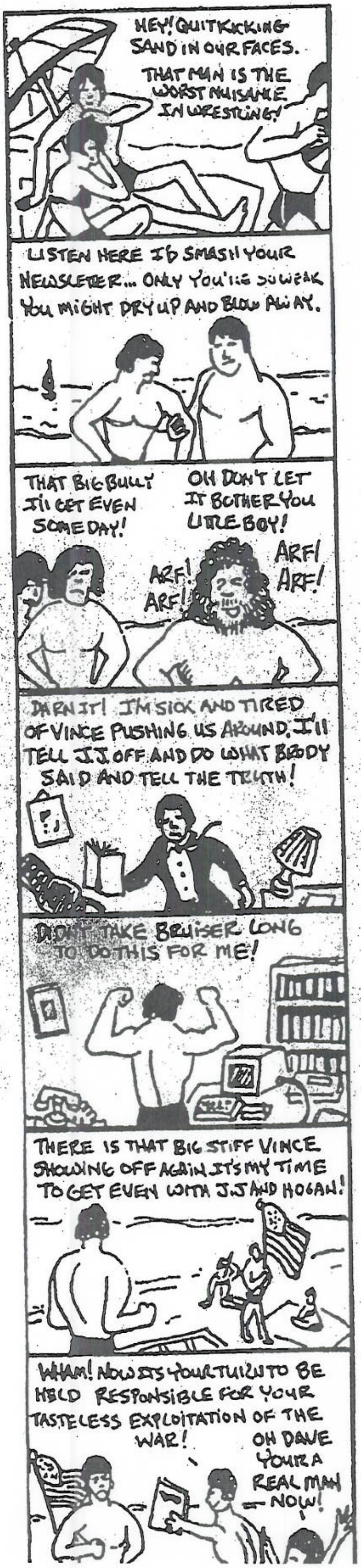


TED DIBIASE

DiBiase, away from the crowds, is silent, sad man. Most rulebreakers are b nature solitary men, never daring to ge too close to anyone. Betrayal is to b expected and friendship is always suspect Some rulebreakers compensate by behavin rudely, others tend to lapse into th ridiculous. DiBiase has no protectiv covering. He's overwhelmed by people' hatred. Nothing in his life ever prepare him for the lonely life of a rulebreaker Unprepared, he suffers like no man i wrestling. It makes one wonder how long h can emotionally survive.

If there was ever a man unsuited t lead the difficult life of a rulebreaker it's Ted DiBiase. In his youth, he was on of the golden boys. Everything in lif came easy to him. Even when he had to wor at something, it was something he loved an

THE INSULT THAT MADE A MAN OUT OF MELTZER


HEY! QUIT KICKING SAND IN OUR FACES.
THAT MAN IS THE WORST NUISANCE IN WRESTLING!
LISTEN HERE I'D SMASH YOUR NEWSLETTER... ONLY YOU'RE SO WEAK YOU MIGHT DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY.
THAT BIG BULLY I'll GET EVEN SOMEDAY!
OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU LITTLE BOY!
ARF! ARF!
ARF! ARF!
DARN IT! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF VINCE PUSHING US AROUND. I'll TELL J.J. OFF AND DO WHAT BRODY SAID AND TELL THE TRUTH!
DIDN'T TAKE BRUISER LONG TO DO THIS FOR ME!
THERE IS THAT BIG STIFF VINCE SHOWING OFF AGAIN IT'S MY TIME TO GET EVEN WITH J.J AND HOGAN!
WHAM! NOW ITS YOUR TURN TO BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR TASTELESS EXPLOITATION OF THE WAR!
OH DAVE YOUR A REAL MAN NOW!

he enjoyed the toil. People flocked to him, hoping some of his magic would rub off on them. There were about 20 boys in his high school who were popular simply because they were his friend. Life was good.

When DiBiase entered wrestling, there was no doubt he'd be a fan favorite. He wasn't a great wrestler, but the fans adored him. He took their adoration as his due; he was accustomed to being adored. DiBiase is the kind of guy who reveled in being a hero. He fed on cheers as if they were oxygen. The golden boy grew to a golden man.

Then it all came apart. A disagreement with another fan favorite. The fans turned on him and he turned on them. DiBiase had no idea what he was getting into. The man doesn't belong in that select society that bravely faces the world and dares to be different. For some men, being called rulebreaker is a liberating experience. For DiBiase, it's an ordeal.

Recently, he returned to Georgia. When he left before, he left as one of the most beloved grapplers the state has ever known. Now he returned as a hated and notorious rulebreaker. Some men would delight in this sign of success. Not DiBiase.

Early one afternoon, I accompanied DiBiase to The Omni in Atlanta. He walked silently down the aisles, his eyes staring at nothing, or perhaps the past. He got to the ring, grabbed a rope, and hoisted himself up. He then walked to the middle of the ring and stood gazing at the empty seats.

"I once owned this place," he said in a strange voice. He wasn't bragging; it sounded more like a man reminiscing about a beloved departed relative. "The fans would stand and cheer whenever I appeared. It wasn't a one-way thing, either. I literally risked my life to please them. I wanted to be everything they could hope for.

"Then I left. Then my life changed. Now when I enter an arena, they boo. They hate my guts. You know, I've seen guys in this business who feed on being despised. It makes them stronger. They wrestle better when somebody calls them a bum. I'm not like that. I don't want to be hated.

"You can think I'm weak. I don't care. I can't go back being a fan favorite. I know that. It used to eat me up inside. Well, whatever it is that eats a person up has had its fill. There's nothing left to consume. I'm empty. I walk into an arena and feel absolutely nothing.

"You may hear me say I hate this guy or that guy or that the fans make me sick. I may believe it at the moment, but later I know better. I can't hate anymore. I feel nothing.

"That's what makes me dangerous. I don't give a damn. Win or lose, what the hell? Give me your best, pal. Nothing scares me.

"People get all hot and bothered about this glove I'm wearing. Now I say it's to protect me from an injury. They say it's a loaded glove. Let them say anything they want. Couldn't matter less to me. They can't make me take it off, so what do I care if they scream themselves blue in the face? What do I care if they call me a cheater?

"There have been times when I thought about hanging it up, quitting this sport and getting a decent job. Maybe even changing my name so I wouldn't run into people who remembered and hated Ted DiBiase. Then I think, what else could I do? No, wrestling is the most lucrative business I could ever be involved with. So I'm hated. No law says a man has to be loved.

"I've had the admiration, the love of friends and strangers. Most people neve get that no matter how long they live I've been luckier than most. Now my luc has turned. That happens. There ar millions of people whose luck is a lo worse than mine.

"Yeah, that's how I want to remembe my career: It could have been a lot worse I could have been Abdullah the Butcher."

DiBiase smiled mirthlessly and go down from the ring. He walked by me an left the arena. I didn't follow. Ther was nothing more either of us could say DiBiase doesn't have what it takes to lau at those who call him a rulebreaker. Y can only pity him. That's not true. you're his opponents, you better fear hi

> "Skoaland won't talk to me about Funk's arrival in the WWF. To be fair, Skoaland won't talk to me about anything, which spares me having to listen to his lies. Skoaland refusing to talk to you is like no being hit over the hea with a mallet."

Of course, there were times when gre wrestlers got their due, as in the next exampl Many of us still await the arrival of this man save wrestling...

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS: October 1980

There is finally hope for the WW Terry Funk, wrestling's wild marauder, coming to get Bob Backlund. In the ne future, Terry Funk will add the Championship to his many other honors.

Though at press time the detai haven't yet been worked out, Terry confident that he will soon be the contender for Backlund's title. If negotiations fall through at the l minute, you can bet your Bruno Sammart bedpan that Backlund had something to with it.

Though everyone will probably deny an unimpeachable source tells me Arn Skoaland, Backlund's manager, has b working overtime to scuttle negotiations. Every legal trick he imagine is being used. The m prestigious law firm in sports law helping him. Already, over $10,000 being spent.

"You'd need a law degree to underst what's happening," my source says," even then you could come up confused. incredibly complicated, and that's idea. They don't have any real l grounds for keeping Funk out. Howe they hope to muddy the waters so much Funk won't want to go in. It's a c trick, but that's what you'd expect Skoaland.

"So far, Terry has hung tough. more legal mumbo-jumbo they hurl at the more he hurls back. Two weeks ago, have bet anything Funk couldn't beat lawyers. Now I figure Funk has a be than even chance. The guy is some ki brawler."

Funk admits there's been some legal harassment, but claims to be unconcerned about it. His attention is focused on Backlund.

"Have you ever seen films of the brat? he asks, a smile spreading across his rough features. "Talk about a bum! I guess he hasn't been massacred yet 'cause people feel sorry for him. Hell, watching the films, I feel sorry for him! He knows he's way over his head in this. Sooner or later, you can see it in his eyes, he knows he's going down. I'm the man who's going to push him under for the third time."

No wonder Skoaland - working for Backlund - wants Funk never to come to the WWF.

Backlund has never faced someone like Terry, for Funk is truly one of a kind. In an age of specialization and complex theories, Terry is a throwback to the reckless brawlers of yesteryear. He takes chances for the sheer enjoyment. Backlund should be overwhelmed in the first five minutes. If the brat has any luck, he'll suffer a permanent injury and retire before wrestling Funk.

As one might expect, Backlund pretends to welcome Funk as a challenger. This mealy-mouthed nonsense is impossible to believe.

"Funk has every right to try for my title," Backlund pompously spouts, "and I expect to wrestle him. I've studied the man and think I can win. The question will be decided in the match.

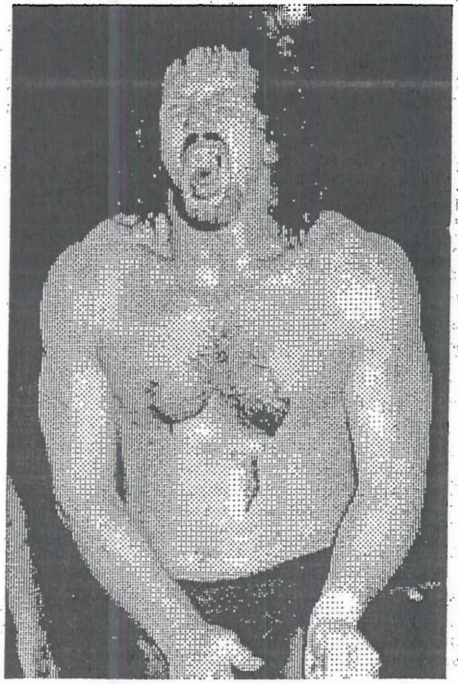
How noble. How brave. How two faced.

Skoaland won't talk to me about Funk's arrival in the WWF. To be fair, Skoaland won't talk to me about anything, which spares me having to listen to his lies. Skoaland refusing to talk to you is like not being hit over the head with a mallet.

Skoaland also hated Funk, which makes any man okay in my book. The manager wimp has called Funk "a ruthless animal," "a rulebreaker," and "a disgrace to the sport." Translated, it means Skoaland is afraid of Terry.

Skoaland is probably more scared of Funk than any other wrestler. Backlund would be as scared as Skoaland if Backlund were smarter. Arnold knows Bobby has no chance against Terry's reckless savagery. That's why Arnold will spare no expense in trying to keep Funk out of the WWF.

Arnold is smart. He is responsible for a good deal of Bruno Sammartino's success, though Sammartino would never give him the credit. He has a genius for making bums look good. Backlund would have lost the title long ago without Skoaland picking and choosing the opponents. Yes, Arnold is smart. But all the brains in the world won't save Backlund from Funk.



TERRY FUNK

> "Rhodes continues to say he wants to be beloved by the fans. Isn't that adorable? Doesn't it make you want to punch his balloon cheeks? He's not afraid of anything - except a couple of boos."

Welcome the arrival of Terry Funk. If, as Backlund promises, the issue is going to be resolived in the ring, welcome future champion, Terry Funk.

Another theme that Shocket consistently came back to time and time again was the sheer pitifulness and bootlicking ability that he saw in the big fan favorite heroes. Considering the fact that the rest of the magazines had to suck up to the powers that be, Shocket pointing out the obvious flaws in these guys was a refreshing change from the usual drivel. Of course, an obvious target was the "Fat Farm's Favorite," Dusty Rhodes,..

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS: September 1980

Reading the story on Dusty Rhodes in this issue, it's easy to see why the fool will never be a champion. He doesn't have the guts.

He says he wants to be champion at any cost. If he has to wrestle dirty, that's the breaks. Someone might guess Rhodes got an attack of smarts. Then Dusty reveals he's the same stupid squid he's always been.

Rhodes continues to say he wants to be beloved by the fans. Isn't that adorable? Doesn't it make you want to punch his balloon cheeks? He's not afraid of anything - except a couple of boos.

This means, for all his famous Rhodes' bluster, that at crucial moments, when a man has to choose between popularity and glory, Rhodes will compromise for popularity. That's like saying, "I'll go all the way, unless the going gets tough."

Fans who worry they won't like the "new" Dusty Rhodes can rest easy. There'll be no change. It takes a man to turn his back on his fans and go for what he believes. Rhodes is no man. The fans will love him because there won't be any change. Rhodes talks a good game. Talk is cheap.

What infuriates me is that Rhodes will probably gain more fame for his milquetoast driveling than most real wrestlers will get from their accomplishments (that his photo should be featured on the cover of this magazine is a disgrace which I protest). How come fans don't care about the truth, brutalized athletes who wrestle hard without bragging about it? Stanley Lane, Greg Valentine, and other young grapplers deserve th publicity. Even some of the veterans Ivan Koloff, Jerry Lawler, and Supersta Billy Graham - deserve the attention nc lavished on Rhodes. That's only th beginning of this man's crimes.

More horribly, his example ha destroyed the careers of men like Austi Idol, Blackjack Mulligan, and Sta Stasiak. Once the best type o competitors, these men have followed i Rhodes' footsteps. They see Rhodes rakir in the money, getting the adulation, al without winning a major title. They ris their necks, are booed for their genius and wind up making less money than Rhodes Who can blame them for following Dusty' example and taking the easy way out?

Also, Rhodes ruins competition. E his ability, he takes away glory from th champions. Wrestlers see that a titl isn't as important as publicity, so the devote more time to talking and less tir to wrestling. The money is in personality not success. You can blame that on Rhodes too.

Still, one can't ignore the man, a one can't ignore a plague. He has capture the imagination of people who pay money fc tickets, and that's all he has to do. Wit his witless patter, shameless pandering t the fans, and ridiculous bragging, hi fame is unquestioned. You can't blam other wrestlers for being impressed. Th money is too good to ignore.

So who is responsible for this diseas named Rhodes? The blame must ultimately k placed on the fans. They made Rhodes star and they are ruining wrestling.

Where will it end? In his quest fc popularity, wrestling has lost Ric Flair perhaps the most skilled young grappler c this era. Others are sure to follow. Th fans in their foolishness dangle fortune and wrestlers accept. You can't blame the for taking the money. You can blame th fans for offering it.

What can be done The fans shoul start appreciating the so-called bad guys Men like Baron Von Raschke, Hulk Hogan, ar the Samoans deserve support. They ma wrestle outside the rules at times - lik every wrestler - but that doesn't matter What is important is that these men and me like them are redefining the meaning of tl sport. Twenty years from now, the men tl fans despise will be known as the heroes c wrestling. People will regard Rhodes as joke.

Every time someone cheers Dust Rhodes, wrestling suffers. Because c Rhodes, the development of the sport ha already been set back 20 years. The longe his popularity remains strong, the mor harm is done.

We are now at a crossroads. The fat of wrestling is in the hands of the fans Either men like Rhodes will dominate c real wrestlers will dominate. Eithe wrestling wallows in hollow words or grow into the sport of the future.

It's up to the fans. Things hav never looked worse.

It is amazing and somewhat pathetic ho true those columns seem today.

Of course, Shocket had his heroes, also. pair that he wrote about time and time again w the AWA Champion, Nick Bockwinkel, and h manager, Bobby "The Brain" Heena Bockwinkel was the erudite, intelligent model a champion and the 70s version of Ric Fla Heenan, before his WWF days, was consummate old style wrestling manage Shocket saw them as two warriors fighting conspiracy of corrupt, incompetent promotio Considering the ultimate fate of the AW Shocket was more correct than he may hav

> "Twenty years from now, the men the fans despise will be known as the heroes of wrestling. People will regard Rhodes as a joke. Every time someone cheers Dusty Rhodes, wrestling suffers. Because of Rhodes, the development of the sport has already been set back 20 years. The longer his popularity remains strong, the more harm is done."

known. Or did he know all along?...

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS

With their usual jackal glee, wrestling fans have been feasting on the bones of Nick Bockwinkel's defeat. Now that Verne Gagne has once again brought the AWA crown down to his level, people are gleefully tearing Nick's reputation to shreds.

Hearing people lately, you'd never know that Nick held the title for five years. Never has the AWA enjoyed a more varied and brilliant defense of its crown. Under the tutelage of Bobby Heenan, Bockwinkel brought the science of wrestling to a new height. There was genius in his best matches, even with the referees trying to handcuff him.

Most of the fans didn't appreciate Bockwinkel's reign, but the idiot masses never appreciated great art when thy first see it. Instead, they cheer the fools who pander to their ignorance. That's why Gagne was cheered so wildly at his victory in Chicago's Comisky Park. The fans can understand Gagne. He's as stupid as they are.

First, let's get one thing straight. Anyone who saw the match knows Bockwinkel was choked to near death. Gagne claims it was a sleeperhold that finished Nick. If you can believe that, be prepared to purchase plenty of stock in the Brooklyn Bridge. P.T. Barnum said there's a sucker born every minute. He could have just as easily said there's a Verne Gagne fan born every minute.

After the match, back in his dressing room, Nick spit up blood for a frighteningly long time. A sleeperhold could not do that. A sleeper cuts off blood to the brain; it's physically impossible for a sleeperhold to produce internal bleeding.

However, a chokehold often causes tears inside the throat. The effects of a merciless choke are exactly the injuries suffered by Bockwinkel. Gagne choked Bockwinkel. That's a fact like air and Bockwinkel's caliber should have his title stolen from him. It's horrible that fans applaud the theft. As long as Verne Gagne remains AWA champ, the title and the association is in disgrace.

No one could blame Bockwinkel if he retired from the sport that treated him so shabbily. After five years of struggling against top opponents and corrupt referees, he has finally been driven to defeat. It's a despicable day in wrestling history. For a man who has given the sport so much more than he's taken, Bockwinkel has every right to quit and live off his fortune.

Some of his friends have been urging Bockwinkel to do just that. For a man not willing to pander to fans, the AWA stinks. Either you imitate Gagne's acceptable cheating, they argue, or get out while the getting is good.

Yet, as his friends advise, they know Nick won't quit. It's just not in the man to surrender. No matter how many times they throw dirt in his face, no matter how many times they invent technicalities or rob him of victories, Nick will battle on. The man in him can do no other thing.

Verne Gagne may be champion now, but his crown sits shakily upon his bald head. The man knows Nick Bockwinkel is after him, and will soon beat him.

This column is not one moaning over defeat. Instead, it's a proclamation of promise. As Nick said the day after his defeat, croaking from a still painful throat, "They haven't beaten me. Gagne and his flunkies, the fans and their stupidity, they can't take away my chance to regain it.

"Gagne won't have the title long. As the nursery rhyme goes, 'All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again.' Humpty Dumpty Gagne can't count on corrupt officials forever. Sooner or later - no, just make that sooner - I'll beat him. I'll tear him apart. Then all the king's flunkies and all the king's fans won't be able to put him together again. This time, Gagne will lose the belt and be forced to retire.

"I can't tell you how it's going to be done, but it'll be done. Right now, Bobby Heenan is planning strategies. I've seen a few of them and they're brilliant. Heenan is at his best under pressure. Take my word for it. Gagne won't know what hit him. But all the bribes in the world won't save him.

"The AWA title is mine. I earned it, defended it, and I want it back. And I'll get it back.

"That's a promise."

"Verne Gagne may have the title, but it could be the worst thing that ever happened to him.

One of his most memorable columns came out of a unique feud in the Mid-Atlantic. It had one of the great slow burning set-ups - simply every week the team of Ivan Koloff and the Iron Sheik came out and did an interview where both subtly compete for the best camera angle. After about a month of this, they finally came to blows. Shocket played it as a tragedy and wrote a column that sounded as if it was written at dawn after spending the night drinking at Raymond Chandler's place...

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS: May 1981

The clock says it'll be dawn in a couple of hours. Right now the world is shrouded in its deepest darkness. This column could only be written in blackness. The quiet night is shattered by the sounds inside my mind.

I've just returned from watching Ivan Koloff wrestle Hussein Arab. The match has for hours but I've been walking aimlessly for too long a time. You can read about the match elsewhere in this magazine, but only in this column will you read the sorrow of it.

In a sane world, Koloff and Arab would never wrestle each other, except perhaps in the joyous spirit of competing brothers. They are too much alike, believing in all the same things, for them to hate each other. The pair should be banded together, making wrestling what they both believe it should be. Unhappily, in this world of pride and anger, there is little sanity.

Their feud is the result of slights that became insults, misunderstandings that became ultimatums, indignities that became too great to bare. If only one o them had remained calm, this feud woul have been avoided.

Yet, that would perhaps be asking to much. Considering the pressures both me are under, it's admirable they ca function at all. The same circumstance that brought them together were destine to tear them apart.

As everyone knows, Arab is Iranian an Koloff is Russian. In America today, thos two nationalities are about as welcome a the plague. The pair was brought togethe because they shared the same sense o isolation. They had to defend thei heritages as well as themselves.

Those who know the pair realize th situation was ridiculous. Neither ma cares anything about politics. They ar interested in wrestling and wrestlin alone. They may as well be considered m without countries, for their only re allegiance is to the sport.

Yet, when forced to defend the background, the men lashed back. They la the patience to explain their belief When attacked, they simply counte attacked. It must be admitted both m like to see other people get upset.

Both men underestimated the pressur their rantings would cause. They fou themselves constantly under attack. first, they defended each other as well themselves. Then, as the assaults beca more withering, they defended on themselves. To do that, they had to ins the other. They knew no other way.

That's what brought on the insult the taunts, the eventual challen Trying to combat forces neither man rea understood, they wound up combatting e other. Two natural friends have bec bitter enemies.

The situation is sad for many reaso First, each man is capable of permanen injuring the other. Wrestling ca afford to lose either of these great stars. More importantly, wrestling deprived of the majesty these two created as a tag team. Those who saw t in their glory will never forget t amazing combination of raw strength controlled skill. Being deprived of t greatness is wrestling's great loss.

Many times during the match I wa to see it stopped. It was obscene that men who belonged together should destroying each other. I only rooted the clock to hurry and end the match. should never have begun and it seeme last forever.

Now, the feud can only be settle more and more bloodbaths. Knowing men, I realize their rage will not satisfied until one enjoys total vict That means either Koloff or Arab probably not wrestle again after this is finished.

I tried to convince Koloff's mana Gene Anderson, to take Ivan to an area. He looked at me as if I was cr

"Ivan wouldn't stand for Anderson explained in anguish and "He demands revenge! He'll get rev There can be no other solution."

When he calmed down, Gene conf "Don't you think I want this thing sto

It's tearing me apart. I had the greatest tag team in the world. Now I have a great wrestler in a dangerous feud. The whole thing could be settled if only one of them would say, 'You're right from your side and I'm right from mine.' But you might as well ask an ant to lift Dusty Rhodes. It'll never happen. Both men let their power do their talking.

"Sure it's a tragedy. But I've been in wrestling a long time. You get used to tragedy. Sometimes, I think tragedy is inescapable. Other times, I tell myself it's dangerous to think."

Recently, *The Wrestler* picked its "Wrestler of the Past 25 Years." The choice was no surprise: Bruno Sammartino. Sammartino has a special place in the hearts of the management at London Publishing since he sold a lot of magazines for them over the years, so when Sammartino announced his retirement match at the Meadowlands Arena it was a sentimental occasion. Sammartino was one of Shocket's favorite targets over the years and his retirement would not pass without comment...

> "Early in his notorious career, Sammartino realized fans don't watch matches with their heads. Rather, they let emotions change the facts to fit their wishful thinking."

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS

It seems like every few months I'm writing a column congratulating Bruno Sammartino deciding to retire. I guess my hope is one time he'll really mean it.

Well, we can all hope wrestling's laughable legend will no longer embarass the sport buy participating in it. It got to the point where even he couldn't ignore the clumsiness, stupidity, and obvious referee favoritism that marked his latest matches. The man moved around the ring like a beached whale with gas. It was pathetic to watch this once mediocre athlete become truly terrible.

We shall be spared the sight of Sammartino walking into the arena as idiot fans cheer wildly. For this, Sammartino deserved out heartfelt thanks. The human race can ill afford to have so many people behaving so stupidly. Sammartino fooled too many of the people too many times. Hearing fans cheer Sammartino had to make any intelligent fan be ashamed for the sport.

Perhaps with his squat body no longer lumbering in front of us, we will be able to forget his ignominious era. It's a crime that he wore the WWF belt when other great wrestlers never had the chance. Time and again, Sammartino joined with corrupt referees and cynical commissioner to protect the belt in match after match. For a combined total of more than a decade, his two title reigns were a blot wrestling can never eradicate. In the history books, his championship years will be known as "The Era of Shame."

Even more despicable than his theft of the title belt is Sammartino's sanctimonious image. One of the most corrupt, inept, pedestrian, and amoral men who ever earned a living in professional sports, Sammartino pretended to be a beacon of honesty. His hypocritical blatherings were an insult to the very concept of integrity.

Early in his notorious career, Sammartino realized fans don't watch matches with their heads. Rather, they let emotions change the facts to fit their wishful thinking. Sammartino could cheat, lie, and use the dirtiest tactics. It didn't matter to his fans. They believed a man who promised so faithfully to be good just had to be good. Sammartino laughed all the way to the bank.

A few years ago, wrestling breathed a sigh of belief when it appeared Sammartino would have to quit. A combination of Stan Hansen's lariat and his own clumsiness resulted in Sammartino suffering a broken neck. It was assumed that the most ridiculous career in wrestling history would finally come to a conclusion. Instead, Sammartino paid the right people and insured himself a victory in his return match.

Probably, Sammartino would've retired soon after except for the emergence of Bob Backlund. Now, I've never been a fan of Backlund's, but I've never denied he has the fans in his corner. Sammartino saw them as his fans turning to a new champion. His ego couldn't take that. In spite of the fact that even he could no longer escape the fact his abilities were abysmal, he couldn't leave the sport. He refused to surrender the spotlight to another. These last years would have been pathetic if they weren't so distasteful. Even Sammartino's enemies assumed he had more class than that.

I suppose he feels able to retire now that his son has invaded the wrestling ranks. You have to admire a kid who has the gall to call himself Bruno Sammartino Jr. and still claims to want to make it on his own. Certainly, he has the two-faced blathering of his father down pat. It won't be hard to exceed his father's athletic ability. Now, if he can only control commissioners and referees like his old man, the punk has a future. It'll be a disgraceful future, but a future nonetheless. He can follow in his old man's mudprints.

It's a pity that there's a chance Sammartino Sr. won't stick to his promise to stay away from wrestling. The sport is better off without him, but the fans might not see it that way. Instead, they'll beg this disgrace to professional athletics to make a comeback. Unable to resist the money and their ignorant adoration, Sammartino will make another comeback. Every time he steps into the ring, he'll prove the stupidity of the cheering fans.

This is not the first column I've written praising Sammartino's decision to retire. Each time he says he'll leave the ring, I applaud his decision. This time, I hope he keeps his word.

Notice that Shocket's predictions about Sammartino's future all came true.

Shocket seemed to live for the day when the real men were appreciated by the fans. One wonders how he would have felt watching some of today's NWA cards where the villains get more cheers than the so-called favorites or the times in the 80s when the NWA's lead heel, Ric Flair, regularly received standing ovations. He sensed a change was coming as indicated by the following...

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS: FEBRUARY 1985

Welcome to the revolution! It's the most exciting occurrence in professional sports in over two decades. Wrestling is on the verge of seeing all its supposed truths turned topsy-turvy and all its heros be exposed for the chumps they are.

ROAD WARRIOR HAWK

The leaders of this revolution are the world renowned Road Warriors, a tag team of such ability and majesty that they've begun to change the very core of wrestling. Yet it is something undefinable, the stuff that separates legends from mere greatness, that makes this tag team the superstars of wrestling's new beginning.

For make no mistake about it, The Road Warriors are going to change wrestling forever. It is a ritual that any team so ruthlessly skilled as The Road Warriors would be despised by the fans. When the team started out, that was so. But little by little, unnoticed at first, The Road Warriors began to build a base of support. Wherever they went, there were more and more fans cheering for them, defying the wrestling ages. The Road Warriors were their own men and they were heroes.

One man who noticed was Bob Geigel, NWA president. He decreed that The Road Warriors, for no real reason, were to be banned from the NWA. Suddenly, fans from all over the country started protesting. They called Geigel every name in the book, all of which he heartily deserved. I'm sure Geigel wasn't surprised. He knew that The Road Warriors were more dangerous to the wrestling establishment than they were to any of their opponents. If the fans started cheering for The Road Warriors, soon he couldn't control how they'd react. He could no longer manipulate things so that his lackeys, the current fan heroes, would prevail. Instead, real men would be the wrestling heroes and he couldn't get his stooges, men like Tommy Rich and Brad Armstrong, to distract the crowd from noticing the corrupt referees that are a professional wrestling blight. No, he couldn't afford to keep The Road Warriors around, no matter how angrily the fans reacted.

So The Road Warriors and their manager, Precious Paul Ellering, took their revolution to the AWA. They quickly became champions, tag team kings of the AWA's world. But the Midwest could not hold them, just like a revolution never stays within the borders of one country. The spirit that is The Road Warriors, that intangible magic that makes them able to turn the fans toward them, had to be practiced all over the wrestling globe.

So they went to the Mid-Southern area and pummeled local heroes Tommy Rich and Jerry Lawler. More shocking than their victory was the sound of fans cheering the champions. Though they spit in the face of what wrestling heroes are supposed to be, fans adored them. More and more people wanted to be part of the Road Warrior experience. And they didn't care if it meant cheering for a team the common people said they were supposed to hate.

Yes, Geigel by his own rights, was perfectly correct to try to ban The Road Warriors. But like every reactionary despot, he couldn't remove the spirit of revolution. That is impossible, because no dictatorial martinet can stop a revolution whose time has come.

The Road Warriors are only the first of the real heroes to be cheered. Soon, the fans will start understanding why people like Ivan Koloff, Iron Sheik, Kevin Sullivan, and Roddy Piper are the true men of wrestling. Mediocrities like Dusty Rhodes and Rick Martel will be booed by fans too smart to fall for their fawning tactics. Now having the guts of real heroes, these current fan favorites will flee the sport for some other area where they can work their loathsome con game. Every time a fan raises his voice to cheer The Road Warriors, the revolution comes one step closer into being. Soon, all of wrestling will know what Geigel sensed months ago. Like corrupt nobles seeking shelter from the masses, the commissioners and their running dogs will gather their forces behind the castle walls of regulations and illegal bannings. But when they dare look outside their offices, they'll know it's too late. The sound they hear, from each cheering fan, will be ringing of revolution.

When the history of this era in wrestling is written, people will wonder why two men calling themselves Hawk and Animal, The Road Warriors, were the catalysts for this great upheaval. And those of us still around to tell the tale will only be able to smile and say, "You had to be there to understand." Because words can't express it nor photos reveal it. You have to experience the ringing of revolution firsthand to tell it, for only then can you understand it.

Of course, I have my own favorite column and as it happened it answered once and for all the question of who the hell was Tommy Rich. "Wildfire" had a brief run as a heel going in Memphis when the promotion trotted out his mother for an interview. Heels Tojo Yamamoto and Jimmy Valiant jumped her and beat her up. Memphis TV colorman Dave Brown described the scene as "embarrassing" in last year's *Torch Summer Annual*. Anybody in the schoolyard knows you do not talk trash about someone's mothers, much less ever beat her up. Bossman did not know how lucky he had it. Even a heel columnist would never condone an attack on somebody's mother. Dan Shocket not only condoned it, he endorsed it. By the time a reader finished the column, he wanted to slap Rich's mom himself...

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS: APRIL 1981

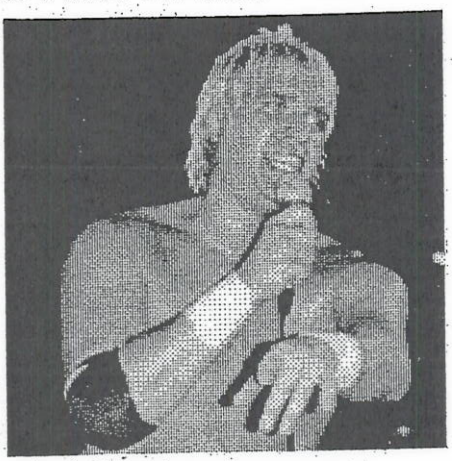
It didn't take long. Tommy Rich, buffoon for the millions, has scurried back to the loving arms of idiot fans. For a few months he flirted with the idea of being his own man, but the strain proved too great. With as little class as humanly possible, Rich has begged for forgiveness. The only people surprised are those who believed Rich had any guts at all. It's amazing how even a mistake like Rich can fool some of the people some of the time.

I suppose people who like wimps instead of wrestlers are happy. His thousands of fans are celebrating. The good boy from the South is one of theirs again. He'll once again make the sport safe for cowards, corrupt officials, and mediocrities.

I must admit to being stunned at the method he chose to win back the fans' favor. A man would at least do his own begging. Rich sends his mother. *His mother!* How ridiculous can a man get? Let's keep watching Rich and find out.

Before we go any further, let's discuss the so-called attack on Rich's mother. The wrestlers who "Went after her," who shall remain nameless in this column because they've received too much bad publicity already, had every right to drive that foolish woman away. As professionals, they need television interview time to help their careers. For a man to send his mother to eat away their interview time is an insult to wrestling professionalism. They didn't wish to hurt the pathetic woman, just scare her a little. It would also be a warning to other fools not to let an old lady do their dirty work.

As some of you may recall, I predicted Rich wouldn't remain outside the fans' approval. All it would take, I believed, was a little time having to stand up for his own beliefs. Rich is the kind of weak personality that needs people telling him he's great. When he can't get that, he collapses.



TOMMY "WILDFIRE" RICH

Being a man fans call "rulebreaker" is tough. It takes guts, integrity, and intelligence. He has to believe in himself and the glory of wrestling. Cheers mean nothing. The ordeal is made worthwhile by the sheer joy of battling in his way. There is also the determination to win at any cost. He has to believe victory is more important than anything else.

Rich never had the stuff to be a "rulebreaker." Throughout his career, he said what fans wanted to hear, did what fans wanted him to do, and battled the men fans wanted defeated. He had no inner vision, no goal which he had to achieve. Tommy just wanted fame and money. That's what every fan favorite wants.

When Rich became a rulebreaker, he seemed to be a spoiled little kid whose feelings were hurt. With the determination of a little kid, he appeared to be waiting for someone to bribe him with a lollipop so he'd behave. But the going got too tough and no one came through with his candy. So Rich, the whining baby, sent his mother to beg forgiveness. A man would have at least gone himself. A child hides behind his mother's skirts.

Tommy can rest easy now. After his mother was "attacked," the fans have nothing but sympathy for the little blond baby. He's now walking around, swearing to avenge this attack on motherhood. Why doesn't he offer to adopt an orphan if he wins the championship? If things got rough again, he could always send the kid to beg forgiveness. Imagine, an orphan and a mother pleading his case. That's better than a lollipop.

I suppose we'll now have to listen to this mewling moron blather about how he wants to win the title for the fans. How he's going to defeat big, bad Harley Race and make fans once again proud of the NWA champion. He'll tell of his horror of rulebreakers and his determination to make the sport clean. The fans will give him a standing ovation. Rich will thank them all the way to the bank. I hope he gives his mother some of it. She's earned it more than he has.

In the meantime, wrestlers with far greater skill and too much integrity to grovel will be earning far less. They'll travel to arenas in old cars whose back seats will be beds when the weather's not cold. They won't have Rich's money for top hotels, first-class jet reservations, and limousines to meet them. All they'll have is their integrity and honor.

The real fault doesn't lie with Rich. He's a despicable hustler who'll take what's given. The fault lies with the fans for giving him the game, the wealth, and the power. It's their approval of him that is ruining wrestling.

A friend of mine thinks Rich sold his soul to the devil to become NWA champion. If that's so, Rich got the biggest bargain in history.

Dan Shocket was a talented writer whose work paved the way for the newsletter revolution by rejecting the standard thoughts about pro wrestling. He did not simply accept the swill promoters dished out and did not write press release-style stories. He alluded to but never directly revealed the realities of professional wrestling and most importantly he had a brazen, entertaining style that was always good for a laugh. The professional wrestling press could certainly use his skills today and those of us who write in it certainly owe him a debt. It was his work that opened the door, just a crack, for a more truthful approach to pro graps writing.

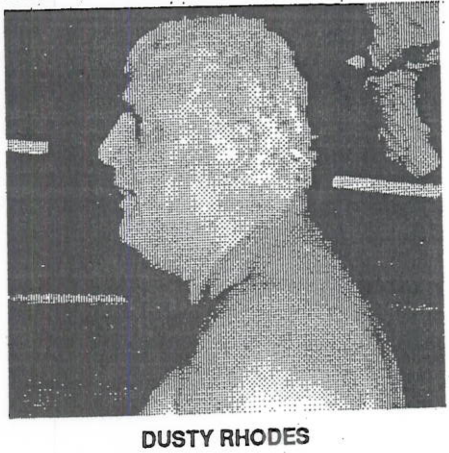
Dan Shockett passed away from complications related to cancer on May 4, 1985. He received the *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* "Editor's Award" posthumously in 1985.

Thanks to Bill Apter, Eddie Ellner, and the folks at London Publishing for help on this story and permission to reprint some of Dan Shocket's columns.

And now, as a final tribute, a "Bodyslams & Pinfalls" on El Booker, Virgil Riley Runnels Jr., one of Dan Shocket's all-time favorite wrestlers... to write about.

BODYSLAMS & PINFALLS

This is a wonderful time in the history of professional wrestling. Dusty Rhodes is blathering away about how he



DUSTY RHODES

should be champion.

For what seems like an eternity, the fat farm's favorite has been complaining about how only he is the true champion, the people's champion, the hero of millions. In fact, he claims to be everything but NWA champion, the only accomplishment that can't be won with a big mouth.

Dusty may work his way into the record books. Certainly, few if any other wrestlers have lost so many title matches. When it comes to the amount of truth, Dusty is constantly shown to be lying through his teeth. He managed to be champion for about a week, then lost it in his first rematch against current king, Harley Race. I know, Terry Funk was supposed to have broken Dusty's arm before the match. Funny, it was only diagnosed *after* the match. Could Dusty have hurt himself in his dressing room so as to excuse his loss? So, did he find a doctor who was willing to put a cast on an arm to heal a broken ego?

Whether or not his arm was broken doesn't really matter. The fact remains that when he was perfectly healthy, he failed to win the title time and time again. The only success he enjoyed was in making his fans believe his excuses.

Oh, how the fans believe. Dusty's popularity proves you can fool many of the people all of the time. Never has a man promised so much, done so little, and been so generously rewarded for his failure.

The reason I'm writing this column is to try to once against explain to fans why Dusty Rhodes is a rotund joke that has become in very bad taste. After my last column on the great white wimp, hundreds of fans wrote to me in various forms of inarticulate rage. Every letter claimed Dusty Rhodes is the greatest wrestler since Jacob.

That is the real tragedy of Dusty Rhodes. He replaces athletic skill with glib patter, brilliance with bravado, and substitutes ferocity with fawning over fans. Men who deserve respect and attention, men like Baron Von Raschke, Hulk Hogan, and Ivan Koloff, these men are booed.

As Rhodes knows better than anyone else, popularity translates into money. Dusty has become very rich practicing his wrestling con game. Great wrestlers are paid less because "the fans don't love them like Dusty," as one promoter explained to me. So Dusty drives a Cadillac and keeps getting richer. There is no justice.

Ask Killer Kowalski. This superb athlete returned with good years still ahead of him. Several months ago, in one of those conversations that take place just before dawn when the truth always seems to come out, Kowalski explained why he quit the sport he loved.

"Rhodes was getting all the breaks," Killer complained. "And nobody else seemed to have a chance. If there was a championship shot, Rhodes got it. I can name a dozen guys who deserved it more than he did. But the fans wanted to see Dusty.

"That's why I quit. Rhodes was making me bitter. I love the sport too much to ever turn against it. It was either leave or lose my love for wrestling. So I packed it in. I don't regret it, either. There are friends of mine, good friends, who stay year after year. They deserve the breaks; they've earned them with their blood and sweat. Instead, Rhodes rakes in the money and gets all the chances.

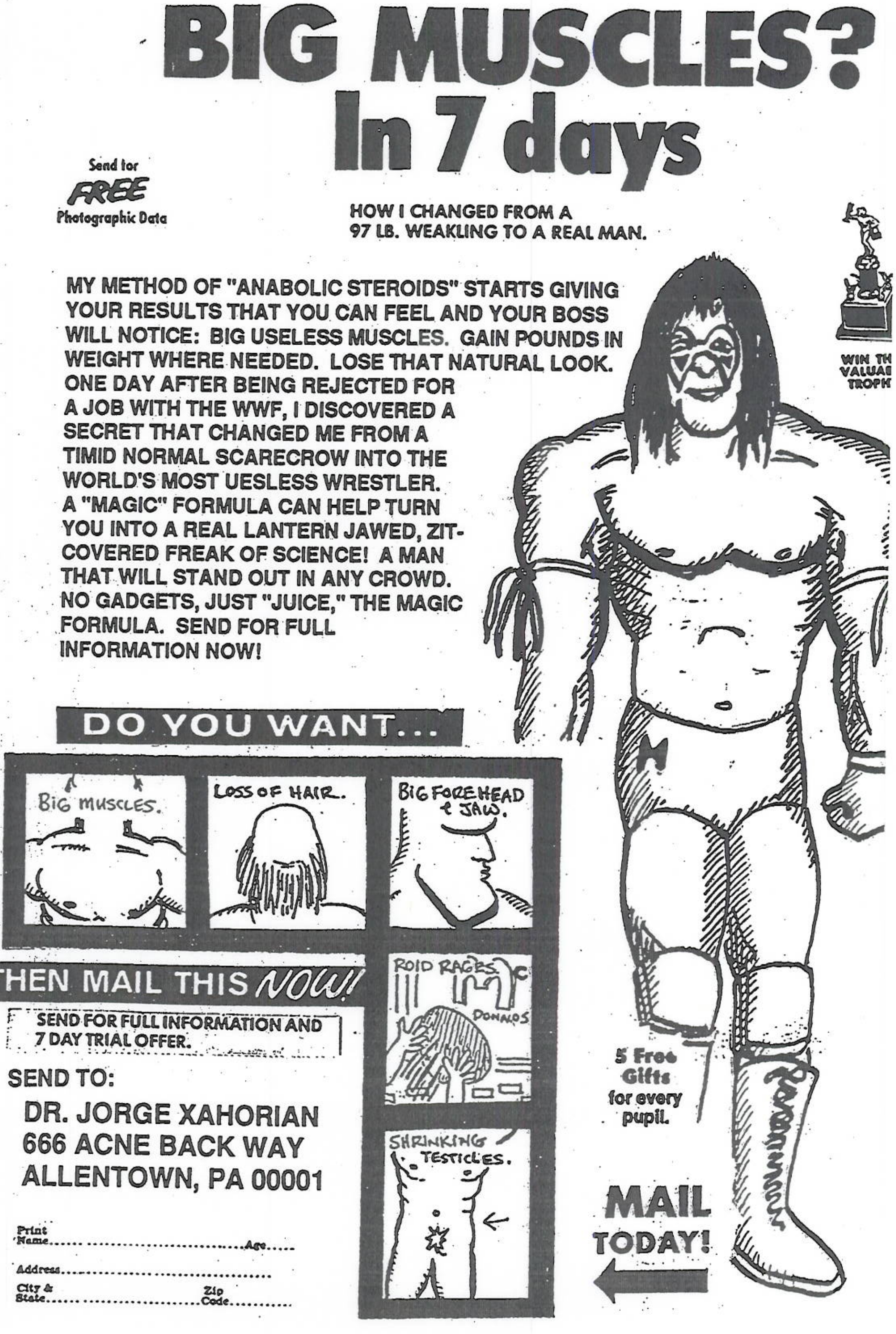
"I see what it's does to them. First, they start complaining about Rhodes. Then they go after the promoters. Finally, horribly, they start attacking the sport itself. Imagine! Here's a guy who's given up everything to spend his life in motels in various nameless cities. There were times I didn't remember what a home cooked meal tasted like. And I did it gladly, as do they for the chance to wrestle professionally. Now Rhodes comes along and spits on that sacrifice, all that love.

"Yeah, I got out before Rhodes made me hate wrestling. I have a school for professional wrestlers today. Every one of them is training to beat the living hell out of Rhodes.

"It won' matter, though. The fans will still love him."

Kowalski is probably right. Thankfully, there are good wrestlers who won't give up trying to make Dusty Rhodes an ex-wrestler.

[Bruce Mitchell and John Hitchcock of Greensboro, NC have been writing and drawing for *Pro Wrestling Torch* since September 6, 1990. John owns a comic book store called "Parts Unknown" and Bruce is studying to become a school teacher.]



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MY MEETING WITH BRODY'S SIZE 16

OR... THE DAY I BETRAYED CACTUS JACK

BY BRIAN HILDEBRAND

In a person's lifetime, there are always a number of milestones, high points... ahem, near orgasmic climaxes, if you will. Well, in my wrestling lifetime, one of the climaxes became a tease for a then-young Cactus Jack, and the milestone of which I speak was a match with with the icon of riots - Bruiser Brody.

The match was to take place in a sleepy town of Athens, Ohio, which that weekend was not so sleepy due to Ohio University's carnival week - and the reason for the matches. An all-star card was to appear at the Coliseum. Brody, Tony Atlas (ironic, huh?), The Rock & Roll Express (who no-showed but were booked), the Iron Sheik, and Sgt. Slaughter, plus lady wrestlers Olympia and Sue Sexton. Up and coming wrestlers on the card included Cactus Jack, Cody Michaels with manager Dante DeNucci, Preston Steele, and more. Promoters of the event were Tony Vaccaro and Dom DeNucci, who ran into some problems, but that is another story.

But the story must digress for one moment to my livingroom a year or so before. While training at DeNucci's, Cactus (when not sleeping in his car) would come over to my home to watch tapes. I believe it was the first time he had seen anything from Japan. We would marvel at Tiger Mask and play and rewind moves to practice at the gym. And we would watch Terry Funk weave the Funker magic that we both wished we could get caught up in - and eventually we did. We talked about making it big in the business together which we didn't. But the one thing we watched more than anything was a worn copy of a Brody tape. It drove my father crazy and comments of "Watch this Mick (Cactus)," "Ah, he couldn't have kicked him that hard." Rewind. "Let me see that again." Slow-mo replay. "Holy shit, he took his head off." "Don't you guys ever watch anything else?" That particular comment still holds true today when Cactus comes through town. Anyway, so much as it scared us, Cactus wanted to wrestle Brody. And I wanted to be by his side, as I usually was. Both of us knew what probably would happen. He'd kick the shit out of us. But that was our wet dream.

Then two months before the Athens show, we were told that the "Big Man" would be there. We begged, screamed, pleaded with Dom to let Cactus have the match. Both of us got all the tapes we could of Brody from World Class, the AWA, Japan, everything. And we watched, studied, and kept after Dom. Finally, two weeks before the show, Tom said that Cactus Jack (Captain Jack-off, the Samoan looking guy, as Dom used to say) and I had the match. We were like little kids. Cactus was planning, "Maybe he'll let me do this... we could go through the crowd like in Japan..." Yeah, and I could be up on his back - piggy back - while he kicks your ass all over the arena." We both liked the thought of Brody mauling Cactus with a manager riding him. The crowd would love it, too, we thought.

The sick thing was though, we took bets on who would take a better bump if Brody gave us the boot. Imagine that... we know deep down that we would probably get the hell kicked out of us - but we were excited about it. A real dream.

BRIAN HILDEBRAND WITH TERRY FUNK

The day of the show, I was offered to also manage the top tag team, which I did, and either The Iron Sheik versus Sgt. Slaughter or Cactus's match. Needless to say which match I chose. Then things got started. Promoter Vacario forgot the advance money (sure he did), the Rock & Roll Express no-showed, and things were just starting to get rolling.

There was enough money to pay off the big guys, but the rest of us got checks (superball style). Dom, sensing the tension in the dressing room, and the knowledge of Brody's actions in these cases - switched some of the matches around. Cactus would now be against Atlas and Johnny V was against Brody. We were pissed. But we also understood that Dom was trying to protect us. Cactus had no choice, but I on the other hand lived up to my nickname "weasel." I looked at Dom with a look that he could not turn down - and it was sincere. I did not even say a word when he said, "Do what ever the fuck you want." So I found Johnny, who was talking to Brody, and walked in. I was nervous as I introduced myself to the legend. He just nodded as I shook his hand. Johnny asked, "Are you coming out with me kid?" I said, "If you want." He said, "Good."

Brody looked up. "Maybe we can use him in the finish?" Valiant said, "He's good." My heart raced as they set up the thing. Brody said, "Now I want you to grab my hair and pull... go ahead."

I grabbed a handful.

"No, pull it hard. I know, I haven't washed it for a week, but it doesn't smell bad, does it?"

I laughed, "No, sir."

"Don't be afraid, kid."

""Okay, sir." Yeah, right.

Finally Brody said, "Then I'll do something to you." I'll never forget this next moment as out of my mouth came the words: "You could give me the boot if you want."

As soon as I said it, I thought, "What the fuck are you doing? You've seen the tapes." But I wanted to say, and say proudly, "I took the boot and lived."

A minute later they called us to the ring, Cactus was standing in the back. As I looked at him, he said, "Traitor." But he understood; he wasn't pleased, but understood. Besides if there was anything left of me, I was going to manage him later.

"The crowd was quiet. I don't think they believed he was there. So, for some reason, something deep inside, I started barking at him. He stood there, looked at me, and with a dumbfounded stare, returned a bark. It scared the hell out of me and I ran and hid behind Johnny."

Valiant and I went out and all 1500 started on us, calling me a "weasel" and him a fag. I was sweating, nervous, excited, yelling at the people and going over the finish the fiftieth time in five minutes. I did not want to fuck up, after all, I might get killed.

Then Brody came out.

No chain, no barking, but he was zig zagging through the ringside. Valiant stood there as I ran around the ring. The crowd was quiet. I don't think they believed he was there. So, for some reason, something deep inside, I started barking at him. He stood there, looked at me, and with a dumbfounded stare, returned a bark. It scared the hell out of me and I ran and hid behind Johnny.

The crowd started barking with Brody. It became deafening. The announcers made the announcements and I walked near Brody and began to act like I wanted to fight him, doing my best Funk bob and weave. Brody looked at the crowd, then looked at me, and looked again. I ran out of the ring, clutched my chest, and Valiant came out to comfort me.

The match took place and I only remember a couple of things. Brody, slamming Valiant's head into the turnbuckle and when Valiant would not take a bump, a thunderous chop removed the choice. Me choking Brody and raking his eyes on the ropes I remember. I did it again in the corner when Brody called me up on the apron, but then I saw this hand grab my face, one hand covered my entire face. I screamed, yelled, kicked like I was being murdered, but I hardly felt it. The fear was real, though. The fear was real.

It came time to go to the finish. Brody was choking Johnny V on the middle of the ropes. I jumped up, grabbed that hair, and pulled and pulled until I finally got him off. Brody turned, grabbed me by my arm pits and lifted me up. I was running in mid-air. Valiant hit him from behind and Brody put me down. Turning, Valiant raked his eyes and called me in. I reached into my boot, put on a pair of knuckles, and hit the ropes. Brody moved and I hit Valiant. I stared down like, "Oh, Fuck, what did I do?" Then I realized that the big man was behind me. I slowly turned, step by step, bent my knees a little until finally WHAM!

A size 16.

I flew up about five feet and came down flat. Watching the lights on the ceiling, I heard the three count and laid there dead. Brody came over, looked down at me, and barked. I flinched and continued to lie there. Five minutes went by. Valiant finally pulled me up and carried me back as I babbled. The people were laughing, throwing stuff. Cactus was right there when I got back.

"How was it?," he asked.

"Great," I said. "He must like me. I'm still living."

Then they called Cactus to the ring. He said, "They switched the matches again. You're in no shape to go out after that."

I said thanks and this began a long, running joke between Cactus and me about the day I sold him out. As I got back to the dressing room, I shook Valiant's hand and went up to Brody. My father came in after taking photos during my match to see if I was okay. Brody looked up at me and said, "Thanks." He complimented me about a few things. "The bark thing was great. I almost laughed." He added, "That was the best bump I've ever seen for one of my kicks."

I wanted to thank him for not killing me, but with the look between us, he knew. Then, being a true mark, I had my picture taken with him. Cactus had a horrible match with Atlas as Bony Tony wouldn't sell for him and Cactus was into it half heartedly after the let down. But we continued to dream of another time when Cactus Jack would meet Bruiser Brody

About two weeks later I found out from Bobby Eaton that Jose Gonzales stabbed Brody the night before. Brody was dead.

I called Cactus and told him the news.

There was silence.

That dream match never came true, but everyone knows the Cactus Jack story and I am happy for him.

As for me, Brody remarked, "Kid, you should be someplace."

I'm still waiting until the time perhaps Cactus Jack and his doctor psychoanalytical B.S. can do this business proud.

[The author of this story, professional wrestling manager "Dr. Jack Curtis" - real name Brian Hildebrand - is one of Cactus Jack's best friends and still hopes to become a full-time manager in professional wrestling. It is safe to say, however, it would be tough to top the night he wrote about in this article.]

CACTUS JACK

THE DUSTY RHODES STORY:

-BY MARK MADDEN-

It's so hot that Dave Meltzer wouldn't print it!

It's so stunning that Jim Herd offered $1 million to suppress it! (He also offered to make me U.S. Champion, but I didn't want to work with Sting.)

It's so controversial, Bruno Sammartino beat me up because of it!

It's so good, Ric Flair said he didn't like it! Which is okay, because he has never told the truth in his life. Right, Mr. Herd?

Yes, I was at a rummage sale in Texas, looking for Terry Funk memorabilia. I had just found and bought the blood-spattered branding iron that Terry once used to belt Dory Jr. as a child when the latter had eaten the former's Sugar Corn Pops one morning when my eye caught a spiral notebook that was spattered with ketchup, mustard, whipped cream, and assorted Sunday food items.

I picked up the book and began to read. I noticed that the author constantly talked about himself. I read further. The writer wrote with a lisp.

Good God! Er, sorry, my god! Could it be...

Yes, it was the Virgil "Dusty Rhodes" Runnels Diaries, a first-person account of Virge the Dirge's early years. I plan on publishing the entire diaries at some point, but have generously decided to make these excerpts available to *Torch Annual* readers. Also, Keller threatened my free subscription if I didn't.

The entires have been rewritten from first person to third person because, as a highly-paid professional journalist, I feel the third person reads much better. Also, only someone who speaks fluent idiot could have understood the original versions. I used Missy Hyatt as a translator, if you are curious.

So, without further ado, I present:

TEN EVENTS THAT SHAPED VIRGIL RUNNELS'S LIFE!

1. As a youth, Virgil played fullback for Austin Central High School's football team. His senior year (he was 23) saw Central meet their big rivals, Austin Catholic, in the season opener. Austin trailed, 21 to 16, with time left for one play when young Virgil took a handoff and rumbled his 373 pounds of sweet soul through the line judge, through the defensive line, and into the end zone for the winning score. Pandemonium broke loose... that is, until the unconscious line judge was revived and called a holding penalty on Central, giving the win back to Catholic. Virgil was disappointing, but saw in weeks to come that the newspapers paid a lot of attention to the controversy and that attendance was up at all Austin area scholastic football games, the fans' interest having been piqued by high school football's first-ever screwjob finish.

Young Virgil pondered the results. "Hmmmm," he said.

2. After graduating, Virgil went to Disneyland. He never rode any of the rides, his time occupied by bussing back and forth between the park's various food stands. And it was on one of those business trips that he encountered his childhood hero-turned-bus driver, former New York Giants pinch hitter, Dusty Rhodes.

"Ah, Dusty," said Virgil, "I can't help but notice, if you understand what I'm sayin' to ya', that you're a pathetic shell of a man, if you will. You're fat, you're drunk, you're not what I could call funky like a monkey."

Said Rhodes, "Listen, fat boy, you're right on all counts. But I'm famous. I still draw a nice major league baseball pension, I get big money for making personal appearances. I eat and drink whenever and whatever I want, and gorgeous women still want to sleep with me - just because I'm famous. [turns in his seat] Mrs. Hyatt, you might not want your young daughter to be listening to this. [turns back] Anyway, pal, my advice to you is to get famous. Then you don't have to be fucked-up like a monkey..."

"Funky like a monkey."

"... to have people think you are. It's the American Dream."

Young Virgil pondered Rhodes's words, then said, "Mr. Rhodes, you're right. And, as your protege, as your little Dusty, if you will, I'm gonna take your name as my own. I am now, 'Dusty Rhodes'."

"Great," thought Rhodes sarcastically, then said, "Hey, kid, do what you want. But take my advice and drop the stupid voice. And lose some weight. I wasn't always this fat."

3. In Junior High School, Virgil and his friends had a party and decided to order some pizza for it. Virgil's friend picked up the phone to order:

"Yeah, we want five extra-large with the works," he said.

"Hey, that's fine for me, Murdoch," Virgil interrupts, "But what about the rest of you guys?"

"Okay, ten large pizzas..."

Anyway, the pizzas arrived and young Virgil decided to try to pull a fast one, asking the delivery boy if he had two tens for a five. He ended up pulling several fast ones and ended up with the ten pizzas and over $100. Young Jimmy Herd is fired from his job as soon as he gets back to the store.

Feeling guilty (but not guilty enough to give the $100 back), Virgil called Herd and tried to make amends. The two wound up friends and, when Herd moved to Austin a week later, Virgil shook his hand and said, "I hope we can do it again some day."

"Maybe we can," said Herd.

Virgil and the gang try the same stunt on the pizza shop's new owners next week, but this attempt ended with a steaming hot extra-cheese pizza hammered into Virgil's face. "That'll teach them not to fuck with Bill Watts's Universal Pizza Federation," said the cowboy-hatted delivery boy.

4. As a baby, Virgil's grandmother thought he was as cute as the proverbial dickens and kept pinching his right cheek. Despite the warnings of Mr. and Mrs. Runnels (who, by the way, kept the Austin Foodland in business almost single-handedly throughout Virgil's childhood), Grandma Runnels just kept pinching and pinching, eventually causing a permanent discoloration on baby Virgil. But, as Virgil added layer upon layer of voluminous fat throughout the years, the discoloration eventually dropped, settling just before his right, er, pectoral. Thus the splotch was born.

No, Eddie Elner did not help me write this one.

5. As a youth, Virgil was coached by his father in little league baseball. He pitched, played shortstop when he wasn't pitching, and batted cleanup despite being far from the most talented player on the team. 'Nuff said.

6. "Well, what you do is just keep giving them money. Lots and lots of it. Then let them do whatever they want. If they wanna play softball, let 'em. If they wanna no-show, let 'em. If they don't want to do jobs, don't make 'em. But above all else, just keep paying them gobs and gobs of cash, despite the fact that they don't draw flies and are totally uncooperative regarding every minor facet of the business..."

[Oops. Heh, heh, sorry. An excerpt from my upcoming collaborative book with Jim Herd: "The Real Art of the Deal," must have slipped in here somehow. The snippet is from the chapter, "Danny and Sid - A Love Story." For those interested, the book will be available through Steve Beverly Publishing around Christmas time. It will be free (as usual, Jim just does not want to make money) and since Steve is involved, our libel attorneys have been notified. Of course, I could be lying about all of this. I have never told the truth in my life.]

7. Since he was young, he has always told everyone he was right. No matter how wrong he was, he was right. No matter how much his having to be right adversely affected others, he was right. No matter how much his having to be right divided his family, sometimes making members of it not talk to him for years at a time, he was right. No matter how much his hypocrisy tainted his status as one of his profession's living legends, he was right. No matter how stupid he looked by contradicting himself whenever convenience struck him, he was right. And when people told him he was not right, he threatened to beat them up. And *then* he was right. No matter what the circum...

[Geez, another mistake. I have too many projects going at once. This is an excerpt from my list of events that shaped Bruno Sammartino's life.]

8. During Virgil's brief stay at West Texas State, one of his football teammates constantly bragged about how he was having sex with Nickila, the team's attractive head cheerleader. But something about his boasts didn't ring true with Virgil, because Nickila was best friends with his sister, Virgilina.

So Virgil grilled his sister and found out that Nickila was, indeed, a virgin. Virgil confronted his friend and asked him why he was lying.

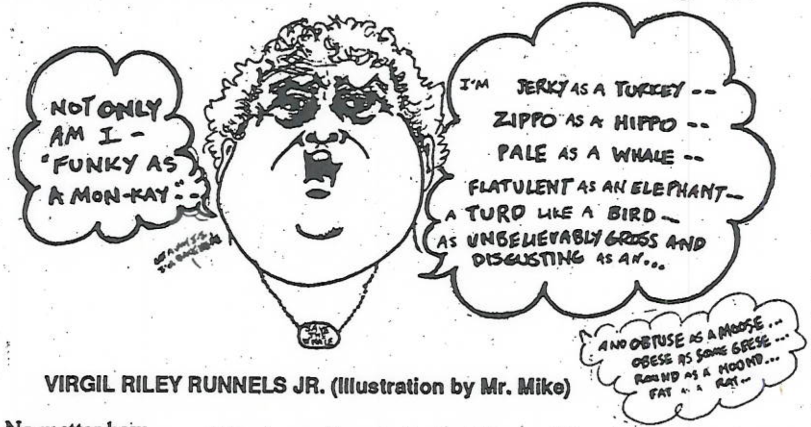
"Why, you fool, you idiot, you 400-pound blob, don't you know that public perception is everything?" said the teammate, one T. Funk. "It doesn't matter if I'm actually sleeping with her yet. The more I talk about it, the cooler the other guys will think I am. And the more likely that she will."

Virgil decided to take his teammate's advice and, in the locker room after the next football practice, he commented, "Hey, you know, I've been sleeping with that cheerleader, Missy."

"Big deal," they respond as one. "Hasn't everybody." But Missy slapped the snot out of him later, saying, "Even us sluts have some standards." Well, she did then.

Happy ending, though. The virtuous young Nickila went on to marry a pro wrestler named Sam and now... well, they're both unemployed. And separated. And Nickla did have to act like she was sleeping with Virgil at one point in her career. So I guess it's not such a happy ending. Sorry.

9. As a senior in high school, Virgil was selected by his drama professor to direct the senior play. He chose Romeo and Juliet, then cast himself in the part of Romeo. Then he examined the script.


NOT ONLY AM I - 'FUNKY AS A MON-KAY' --
I'M JERKY AS A TURKEY --
ZIPPO AS A HIPPO --
PALE AS A WHALE --
FLATULENT AS AN ELEPHANT --
A TURD LIKE A BIRD --
AS UNBELIEVABLY GROSS AND DISGUSTING AS AN...
AND OBTUSE AS A MOOSE...
OBESE AS SOME GEESE...
ROUND AS A HOUND...
FAT AS A RAT --

VIRGIL RILEY RUNNELS JR. (Illustration by Mr. Mike)

"Drama professor, o' mine," he exclaimed. "I been perusin' the script and it don't quite measure up to standards, if you get what I'm sayin'."

"Sh-sh-sh-sh-shakespeare?" said the horrified professor. "Not up to st-st-st-standards?"

"You got it, Professor Page, and y'all got to do somethin' 'bout that stutter... wait, on second thought, it may come in han-dy. Anyway, I got a little rewritin' to do."

The prof, eyeing a job as a Virgil crony in later life, let Virgil do his stuff. And, a few short hours later, Virgil emerged with his masterpiece.

When the play was performed, Shakespeare buffs are startled to note that everyone in the play was talking favorably about Romeo, even Juliet's parents, and did so throughout the entire play. Noted in particular is the line, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo, gettin' funky like a monkey, gettin' down and dirty like the Bull of the Woods you are, baby?" And the finish of the play, which, instead of Romeo and Juliet both committing suicide, had Romeo calling a dying Juliet a "bleached blond Jezebel," then riding off into the sunset with a girl made up to look like Marilyn Monroe. All of Dusty's friends and neighbors were in the play, most of them acting as valets and seconds to the Montague and Capulet families.

Most of the audience walked out ten minutes into the play, but afterwards, Virgil's relatives and friends told him how great he was and how great the rewrite was. This particular episode in Virgil's life would not come back to haunt him so much as all of us.

10. As a second-grader, Virgil got a job delivering the Austin Daily Planet which was involved in a bitter circulation war with the Austin Daily Blab. Virgil's charismatic personality and winning ways quickly gave him the biggest route of any of the Planet's paperboys, which lead to a call from Blab circulations director, Pat Patterson, who had a proposition... no, not that kind of proposition... for young Virgil.

"Virgil, my friend, how you like deliver our paper?" Patterson said.

"Doesn't sound like much of an offer if you have only one paper," the then naive and trusting Virgil said.

"No, that just the way I talk, you idiot. I never pluralize. Anyway, we double your salary. But make up your mind. I got the Von Erich and Douglas kid coming over tonight, and I wannabe rested up when I... help them go over dere route."

Virgil accepted the offer. Then, eight months later, Patterson called with another propositions... no, still not that kind of proposition.

"Virgil, you going to go back and work for da Planet, but we still gonna pay your salary," Patterson said.

"What?" said a confused Virgil.

"Yeah, you gonna fuck up dere business. You can be more valuable to us dat way. Just do everything you can to make people hate dat paper."

"Virgil agreed, and drawing double pay, proceeded to take his papers and throw them in sewers, on roofs of houses, in gutters, every place but on porches. When Planet circulation director Jack Petrik confronted Virgil on his poor job, Virgil blamed the helper, who is immediately fired.

"That's okay pal, we're moving to Minneapolis anyway," said a defiant young Richard Morgan Fliehr. "And someday I'll be way more famous and respected than you. And my dad's a gynecologist, which sort of speaks for itself. Whooo!"

How long did young Virgil get away with this sort of chicanery? Well, some would say he still is...

[Mark Madden, of Pittsburgh, PA writes a monthly column for Pro Wrestling Torch Weekly called "You May Not Like It..." He began writing for Torch Weekly in the April 4, 1991 issue. Mark, a 13 year veteran sports writer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, graduated with a Journalism Major from DuQuesne University, a school which has graduated no professional wrestlers. Mark, while just a child, was forced by his grandmother to watch Bruno Sammartino and is grateful... really.]

ATSUSHI ONITA

A ONE MAN SHOW OF BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS... THE STORY OF ATSUSHI ONITA & FRONTIER MARTIAL ARTS

BY: CHRIS ZAVISA

In the book and film "The Right Stuff," the Air Force test pilots who later became the Mercury astronauts, talk about "pushing the envelope." They risk their careers, health, and even their lives to take the accepted borders of achievement and shove them a bit further toward the outer fringes. Every professional has competent craftsmen who do the job, sometimes doing that job extremely well. There are a few people in any profession who deliberately "push the envelope."

In wrestling, especially the world of Japanese professional wrestling, the most enthusiastic envelope pusher is Atsushi Onita. Over the past ten to fifteen years, and possibly back to the days of Rikidozan, Japanese wrestling was a pretty staid operation. Wrestling - just the basics with no frills - was what you got for your hard earned yen. Unlike the States, there were none of the theatrical events that climaxed hot feuds. When I first became interested in Japanese wrestling, I wondered why there were no steel cage matches, bullwhip bouts, Texas Death marathons, barbed wire bloodfests, and various other goodies we in the States had come to know and love as an internal part of the game. I was told that they do not need that carnival stuff. They take their wrestling seriously in the Land of the Rising Sun.

For the last two decades and more, Giant Baba and Antonio Inoki have owned the Japanese mat world with their All Japan and New Japan promotions. Conventional wisdom said there was no room - and no fan money - for a third promotion. In the late 1980's, Akira Maeda changed acrobatic highspots, heightened realistic looking mat work, introduced clean finishes, and packaged his product as the real thing. The money and adulation tolled in as Maeda became the new darling of Japan. Until front office politics destroyed the UWF from within late in 1990, Maeda had defied the conventional wisdom.

Or had he? There probably was and is no room in Japan for a third promotion that simply copies the style and tone of the two long established promotions. Super World Sports seems to be living proof of this. But if you can push that envelope and give fans something they cannot otherwise get, you may have a chance at survival. At the very time Maeda was confounding the experts, along came Atsushi Onita and Frontier Martial Arts Wrestling.

Atsushi Onita was born on October 25, 1957 at a time when Japan was successfully emerging from an American directed restructuring of their nation. Unlike many other Japanese males, the young Onita had no desire to become a "sarriman" - a three piece suit - dutifully and obediently climbing up the expanding corporate ladder. Inspired by the success of Rikidozan, Baba, and others, Onita left high school on his 16th birthday and began training for a career in pro wrestling. His first pro bout came on April 14, 1974. He was sent to the USA and placed under the care of Terry Funk in west Texas. Much of Onita's style was personally developed by his trainer, the legendary Terry Funk. Onita spent several years touring the States in a variety of Oriental incarnations and characters. He learned how to wrestle and learned the business from the Funks. Probably the one match that stands out from this period was the infamous Tupelo, Mississippi Concession Stand Match from 1981. His obvious talent for arena-wide brawling was clearly demonstrated.

In 1981, a young flyer named Satoru Sayama took the Japanese wrestling world by storm and in his own way pushed the envelope to new limits. Wrestling psychology, and above all, a theatrical flair helped make him a star above everyone else. Sayama, as "Tiger Mask," worked for Inoki's New Japan promotion.

While Onita never had the complete package of skills that Sayama possessed, he was a very competent junior heavyweight. He could do some of the flashy dives, execute some wicked suplexes, and demonstrate enough passable technical skills to be groomed for the top junior spot and accepted by the demanding Japanese fans. From 1981 to 1983, he wrestled Baba's other smaller wrestlers and a variety of Mexican and American imports.

The single factor that enabled Onita to get over was his workrate. In the ring, Onita always gave a one-hundred percent effort. His trademark was taking crazy bumps in the tradition of his mentor Terry Funk. He often would finish a bout completely spent, dropping to his knees, near physical and emotional exhaustion. When he won the All Japan Junior Heavyweight Title in North Carolina on March 7, 1982, he waved the strap towards Funk at ringside while tears streamed down his face. All of these various components - the all-out workrate, crazy bumps, ring dives, arena brawling, tearful postmatch scenes - all of these would be carefully reassembled and integrated into his FMW reincarnation several years later.

Even though Onita had All-Japan's junior strap - officially titled the NWA Junior Heavyweight Title - he was not actually a major star in the class with Jumbo Tsuruta and Baba himself. All Japan never placed the emphasis on their junior division that Inoki did on his. On 0 Baba's television broadcasts from 1982 and 1983, Onita rarely appeared, and when he did appear, it was in an edited opener that barely got five minutes of air time. Onita was in a unique position of being a prelim star who had gone about as far as he could go. The kind of acclaim and media attention given to Sayama's "Tiger Mask" was beyond him.

Onita's career suffered a serious setback in 1983 against his old foe, Hector Guerrero. He badly tore an already tender knee and was out for nearly one year. Late in 1984, he returned, but the deteriorating knees just could not take the night after night pounding and the shock of those ring dives. In late-1984, after a brief six-month comeback, Onita retired from professional wrestling. It is interesting to note that Sayama's star turn for Inoki and Onita's for Baba started and ended at roughly the same time.

Onita sat out the wrestling game for four long years. By the late 1980's, his knees had somewhat recovered allowing him to work again. On July 2, 1989 he made his return to Japanese wrestling on the second annual card to honor the creator of Tiger Mask, Ikki Kajiwara. A sellout crowd packed Tokyo's Korauken Hall to watch Onita in the main event against a karate star, Seiji Aoyagi. It was an extremely heated mixed match fought in rounds that ended with Onita losing when things got dirty in round four. Onita brought in a steel chair to open up Aoyagi and tried to bounce him off some ringside tables. Aoyagi's bodyguards jumped to his defense and a huge melee ensued. The bout came off looking like Onita had made a triumphant return as the defender of pro wrestling against the martial arts outsider. It worked to perfection and shortly thereafter Onita announced formation of his Frontier Martial Arts promotion.

Frontier Martial Arts officially opened on October 6, 1989 in Tsusuyahashi before a sell-out crowd for another match against Aoyagi. Over the past two years, Onita has not only pushed the envelope, he has torn it, ripped it, and generally mutilated it. Consider just a few of the bouts he has had along the way.

February 12, 1990, Korauken Hall in Tokyo, Onita wrestled Masa Kurisu in a barbed wire match. This was not the American version where wire is strung outside of the ring ropes. Here, thick coils of barbed wire were placed on the arena floor. Onita was thrown out six times and each time opened up a new body part. Kurisu hit the wire twice. Putting it mildly, it was a bloodbath.

April 1, 1990, Korauken Hall in Tokyo, Onita and Goto faced Sakaruda & Kurisu in what the Japanese Wrestling Journal called "the greatest brawling held in Japan in years." The four went all over the building with tables, chairs, and everything else not fixed to the floor. It was one of the best bouts of the year by most accounts.

May 12, 1990 in Towada, Onita & Asako faced Kurisu & Wild Bullman. Onita and Kurisu brawled out of the arena and took a good portion of the crowd with them into the landscape.

July 22, 1990 in Nichinan, the weirdest

show - even by FMW standards - saw the ring in the middle of a lake with the wrestlers taking bumps and doing dives into the wet stuff. Everyone had a great time and nobody needed a shower afterward.

July 25, 1990 in Nitakyushi, Onita broke a table in half while driving Goto's head through it with a piledriver. That would be repeated countless times on FMW cards in the following year.

August 4, 1990 at the Tokyo Outdoor Shiodome, Onita faced Goto in a barbed wire match interlaced with 120 electronically wired exploding bombs. Fifty-six of them exploded during the bout producing one of the most savage bouts on record.

August 29, 1990, Onita wemt to Puerto Rico and was jumped and stabbed in the WWC offices by Brody murderer, Jose Gonzales. More on this incident later.

November 5, 1990 in Sapporo, Onita & Goto battled Mr. Pogo & The Wild Bullman in a barbed wire match. At one point, Pogo took several strands of barbed wire off the ringpost and wraped Onita in it like a Christmas package.

May 6, 1991 in Osaka, The Ultimate Death Match, with Onita battled Pogo in a coiled barbed wire match with the outside ring area loaded with exploding mines. These contraptions exploded four times which caused the wrestlers to vanish into a cloud of smoke.

ATSUSHI ONITA, BLOODY AND EXHAUSTED

Pushing the envelope is extremely risky. Many of the Air Force test pilots lost their lives trying to do it. In August and September of 1990, Onita nearly lost his career with a terribly conceived and totally tasteless angle.

On June 16, 1988, Puerto Rican wrestler Jose Gonzales stabbed to death Frank Goodish, who wrestled as Bruiser Brody. The stabbing took place in a locker room at Bayamon Stadium. Brody became the first wrestler ever murdered apparently due to a dispute over a finish to a match. Gonzales was later tried in a Puerto Rican Court of Justice - an oxymoron in my book - and set free without even a ten buck fine. Brody was one of the most loved and hated wrestlers in the world. The outlook depended a lot on if you were a fan or a promoter. In Japan, he was one of the most, if not *the* most, popular non-Japanese who regularly worked there.

In August of 1990, Onita decided on what he believed to be a sure-fire idea to pack a large arena on FMW's first anniversary. He would defend the honor and memory of the slain Bruiser Brody in front of the fans who loved him most. There were certainly 10,000 fans who would pay to see the hated Gonzales getting a portion of what was long overdue to him.

You can debate the wisdom and ethics of even booking Gonzales to wrestle in Japan. Perhaps it would have worked if it had been done a lot differently. I tend to doubt even that.

But where things went terribly wrong was with the angle to set up the match. To put it as plainly as possibly, Onita went to Puerto Rico and met with Gonzales and WWC brass. While in their corporate offices, a brawl ensued and Onita was badly beaten. Gonzales then "stabbed" Onita in the chest and he was taken for stitches. When word spread of this the almost universal reaction was one of total outrage. Many felt that Onita and Gonzales were mocking Brody's death by repeating the stabbing incident. It was as if Onita was helping Gonzales thump his nose at the world. He had indeed gotten away with murder and now was going to cash in on it. This one time, Onita had pushed the envelope too far.

Even upon returning to Japan and experiencing firsthand the negative reaction to his angle, Onita misread it, believing he was creating fantastic interest in the upcoming bout. Onita thought he had created the number one villain of all-time: Jose Gonzales, the heel from Hell. It was only after many FMW executives, friends, and investors continually worked on Onita that he admitted his error and dropped the use of Gonzales. He made a type of public penance to the Japanese press and all seemed forgiven. At least until the next time.

However, Onita has not completely scrapped his Puerto Rican connection. Lately, he has been using Gonzales associate Victor Qiunones as a pseudo-stand-in for everything that Puerto Rico stands for in the minds of the Japanese fans. So far, he has kept within the proper limits in using Quinones. But many in the wrestling world are questioning this use.

If there were an MVP award in wrestling, an award given to the grappler without whom the promotion could not survive, it would be Onita. FMW is a one-man show. Sure, they field an entire card of bouts and have champions in several different categories. But every FMW ticket-buyer purchases a ticket in spite of the undercard. They pay to see Onita do his thing - The Wild Thing.

Wrestling entrance music is greatly overused. But when you get a proper match of music and wrestler, it can really pop a crowd. The Road Warriors longtime use of "Ironman" was one obvious example. Onita enters the arena to a reworked version of the classic Troggs hit, "Wild Thing." He is not a big man by any stretch. He is not cut or even muscular. He certainly does not look fierce or mean. In fact, there is a lot of the children's rolly poly teddy bear in Onita's physical appearance. His usual costume is of blue trunks and a white tank top. It has to be white since the blood shows up so much better on white than on colored material. His head, face, shoulders, arms, hands, chest, thighs, calves - one, several, or all - may be heavily bandaged and taped.

As the heavy chords of "Wild Thing" pour across the arena, Onita makes an entrance so perfect, it could be scripted by Hollywood. Nearly every fan in the arena is stands on their feet screaming his name. Many in attendance are teenage boys, the same boys who early in the card shouted incredibly cruel taunts at every missed move by the prelim workers. Now they are under Onita's spell. The crowd surges around him in a reception that is a hybrid of religion and rock. The crowd loves Onita; they worship Onita. He is Everyman. He is the aging prelim junior who clawed his way to the top of the heap. He is their hero.

In the match that follows, it does not matter who wins. Onita knows what his disciples want and he gives it to them in spades. He gives them one-hundred percent and then digs down deeper and gives more. Onita possesses a minimal amount of genuine wrestling ability, but pads it with liberal doses of punishing kicking, brawling, running headbutts, DDT's, powerbombs, an occasional ring dive, and enormous amounts of blood. He sheds more blood than any wrestler in the world today. Much of his bouts take place outside the ring among the crowd. Tables, chairs, and anything else within reach is employed. As Onita and his opponent brawl around the arena, they leave a wake of overturned chairs and scattering fans behind. The crowd surges away from them, seeks safety, then surges back to get a better look at the carnage. After several minutes of this, Onita banishes his opponent to the dressing room and returns to the ring to receive the chanting adulation of his public.

This informal post-match ceremony is not the carefully choreographed posing that Titan fans get from Hulk Hogan. Onita's moment with the crowd is far more spontaneous. It is a tearful, emotional, physical bonding of the hero and his worshippers. It is totally honest and genuine.

His fans often clog the arena stage exits hoping to touch him. It has become popular to press a handkerchief or towel to his wounds and collect a souvenir of blood. Onita often leaves the arena, mingles outside with the crowd, and returns to the dressing room for his famous interviews. He collects all the press around him in a semi-circle. Onita is near the edge of physical and emotional exhaustion. A doctor looks over his wounds, trying to decide where to begin the sewing. Onita drops to the floor, so spent he can no longer stand. He begins to whisper comments to the press. As he continues, he builds in volume and intensity until he is nearly raving about the match, his opponent, the fans, the promotion. His voice cracks and tears roll down his cheeks again in an emotional release.

Atshushi Onita is the only wrestler in the business who cannot be beaten at his own game. I cannot imagine anyone outdoing him at what he does. His is a true original. Often fans discuss bouts on the way home from the arena. You hear the criticism that "it would have been better if they had only done it this way," or, "I thought it was going to be great, but they held back at the end." I do not think there are many of these comments after Onita's matches.

Onita is a one-of-a-kind. He may not be a good technical wrestler. He will probably never be rated in the top twenty or ever be considered for "Wrestler of the Year" in the U.S. polls. But Atsushi is what he is and for that I am grateful.

[Chris Zavisa of Plymouth, Michigan has been writing "Japanese Highspots" monthly since the February 28, 1991 issue of *Torch Weekly*. Chris, a full-time high school teacher, has intensely followed and studied Japanese wrestling since 1986. He has seen over ten years worth of Japanese television wrestling. Each month in *Pro Wrestling Torch Weekly*, Chris tries to increase your understanding of Japanese wrestling plus comment and editorialize on current Japanese wrestling events.]

WCW
WCW
WCW
FLYI
EL GIGANTE

WCW'S STOMP COLLECTION

A LOOK AT WCW'S TWO SETS OF TRADING CARDS

BY: ERIC KROL

It is obvious to anyone watching wrestling that World Championship Wrestling is trying to copy the Titan Sports circus formula in its desperate attempt to find success. WCW is doing this despite Jim Herd's protestations to the contrary of "we can't dance" as well as the WWF. Although the house show product and television ratings have not been successful, one area where WCW seems to be making strides is in merchandising. WCW action dolls are side-by-side with WWF dolls in toy stores with no differentiation between the two. Following previous Titan success, WCW has also entered the fast-growing trading card market with not one, but two sets of cards featuring the group's top stars. As a serious card collector, I purchased enough of both types to make a full set of each series. Each set has its merits, but they are geared toward different audiences.

The more publicized cards are those contained in the "Stomp Collection," a 162 card series issued by Impel Marketing of Charlotte, North Carolina. These are the cards advertised on TBS and on the back of Bill Apter's news stand magazines.

The other cards are issued by Championship Marketing of Dallas, Texas. This is a 110 card series with a puzzle card contained in each 15-card pack. In a typical WCW marketing maneuver, although the Stomp cards are heavily pushed on TBS, only the Championship cards are sold at house shows.

The Stomp cards are geared more towards kids. The Stomp cards have flashy, color-coordinated borders, yellow for singles competitors, red for tag teams, and green for managers and announcers. The card backs feature a facial shot and list of each wrestlers' nickname or motto, hometown, and favorite hold, and includes a short paragraph about each wrestler. The cards of each performer run sequentially, starting with numbers 1 through 13 featuring Sting to cards 157 through 160 with Missy Hyatt gracing us with an appearance. The information is Apter-like in nature, such as on card 117, "(Michael) Hayes is a brawler. He'll do what it takes to get the job done." This coupled with the design makes the Stomp cards more desirable to young collectors. Some of the mottos listed on the cards are below Apter's standards, such as Sting's motto, "We're having fun now," which I have never heard him say. Or how about that well known (not) Sid Vicious cliche, "I'm a fuel-injected suicide machine" or his "words to live by": "I'm no blonde prima donna cutie pie." And with all of Ric Flair's well-known phrases, you think they would get at least his motto right, but Flair's official motto according to the Stomp makers is: "I'm the latest and the greatest." It would have only taken a quick proof-read by somebody involved in WCW to at least get one of Ric Flair's many famous phrases correct.

The Championship cards are definitely geared more toward older collectors and, dare I say, hardcores. The design is crisp, with a black background and gold-starred borders. more importantly, the Championship cards have a special gloss on the front that collectors are sure to love. These cards, unlike the Stomp cards, have the wrestlers featured randomly. The card backs feature a facial photo of the performer and list stats such as height and weight, greatest achievement, toughest opponent, and like the Stomp cards, a motto, hometown, and favorite holds. One drawback to the Championship cards is that the information about the wrestlers is the same on each card. For example, the backs of cards 1 and 20 list exactly the same information on Sting. The Stomp cards vary the information on the card backs.

The reason the Championship cards are geared more toward older collectors and hardcores is the informative paragraphs found on the back of each card. For a company that hates the newsletters the hardcore fans, some of th information revealed is surprising. For exampl the Paul E. Dangerously cards state his re name, Paul Heyman, and that Paul graduate from Edgemont High School in 1983 i Scarsdale, New York. It goes on to give Paul E life history from college to today, ev acknowledging that he was once fired from TB Of course, it lists the reason as maki "controversial statements," but did not speci that those statements were not on the air, b behind the scenes to booker Ric Flair and ot management. Card #24 states the Freebirds w the first to use ring entrance music, while Rick Steiner cards acknowledge his entrance WCW as Sting's partner plus his membershi the Varsity Club. The cards actually try to the wrestlers over as human beings instead cartoon models. The Lex Luger cards recogr him winning the 1986 *Pro Wrestling Illustr* Rookie of the Year Award.

Perhaps the most honest card is #99, wl features Missy Hyatt. The card says, "She is of the reasons that men across the country glued to their TV sets" for TBS's "Main Ev program. The back also lists the awards she received from various magazines. Howev fails to say that she has won the "Hot Love From Hell" award three straight years in outrageous *Chokehold* newsletter. The card acknowledges that she once managed Steiners and Sting. The latter is news to me. card states "it didn't take a genius for the bigwigs to discern what wit an hourglass f could do for a nationally televised wre program," so Missy entered broadca Because the cards were published before got involved romantically with Jason H that was not mentioned on the cards. Ho they did find room to mention Missy spen off-camera time training her horse, Ozzi her dog, Sasha-girl.

Another aspect that sets the Champi cards above the Stomp Collection photography. The photos for the Champi cards are mostly action shots as opposed relative still-shots of the Stomp cards reason for this may be that the Champ action photos were taken by Dennis Brent and the portrait types by Teryl Jackson, while the Stomp cards have no photo credits. Both series share the card of The Steiners holding a dog. The same photo was also used in a WCW poster. The Championship cards have some really great and unique photos that could become hardcore fans' collector items, especially if WCW folds before the end of 1991.

The Championship cards were made the time Sting was WCW Champion. The collection includes a photo of Sting in Baltimore immediately after he won the WCW belt from Ric Flair, with Sting's face-paint smudged due to the action of the bout. Card #10 shows Sid Vicious posing for the Halloween Havoc '90 video, tied up ala Frankenstein. Card #55 is really special, as it shows Sting against The Black Scorpion, Al Perez on this occassion, from the fall Clash. Who would have thought they would acknowledge that nightmare of an angle? Card #64 shows El Gigante and Sid Vicious locking up, showing Sid's relative shortness to the man who wants "dee belt." Card #69 shows Missy managing The Steiners, which dates that photo as being a couple years old. Card #81 is an attractive picture of Missy. Card #83 shows Sting celebrating in the locker room with champagne after his title win. Card #85 is unique also, as Sting is shown being attended to in the locker room after his knee injury at the February 1990 Clash, while #87 shows Sting at ringside for Lex Luger challenging Ric Flair at WrestleWar `90. Card #101 features Tony Schiavone and #110 pictures Doom wearing masks with Woman by their side.

"Dirty" Dutch Mantel was one of the more unlikely wrestlers to appear in both sets. He is on #34 of Championship and #77, 78, 79, 80, and 81 in the Stomp Collection. At the time the cards were published, Dutch was co-host of World Wide Wrestling with Tony Schiavone and at the time seemed like one of the few wrestlers likely to still be with WCW in six months given Ole Anderson's haphazard booking at the time. The same reason applies to Tommy Rich's and Ricky Morton's appearances on the cards.

Unfortunately, due to the long delay due to conception, production, and distribution, many wrestlers have since left and entered the WCW who are not included in the sets. The same delay occurs in baseball where George Bell is pictured in a Toronto Blue Jays uniform instead of a Cubs uniform this year. He switched teams after the late-November baseball card company deadlines. That is why the sports card companies issue update sets at the end of the season to keep track of rookies and trades. I doubt WCW will be coming out with an update set this fall with a change in the name of The Southern Boys and a change in character of Terry Taylor. Luckily, Oz missed the original deadline and since his firing would not appear in a fall update set if there was one due to his June departure.

WCW'S CHAMPIONSHIP MARKETING CARDS

The Stomp cards do not feature any unique photos, but they do capture the facial expressions of Arn Anderson and El Gigante. Of course, what else could they possibly have captured of the big man?

Both cards are priced about the same, from 50 cents per pack at stores to 59 cents at specialty hobby stores. In the Chicago area, the Stomp cards have a wider distribution than do the Championship cards. According to several dealers, sales were about what was expected for this kind of a product. From what I saw, most dealers took a chance on these cards by ordering several boxes. From what I could tell, the cards are moving at a decent pace everywhere. With the sad state of WCW and poor promotional tactics in many other areas, the card distribution and sales must be satisfying for management.

I purchased a box of Stomp cards for about $15, which is relatively cheap, as prices range toward $20. Out of the box I purchased, I completed one set and nearly had enough cards to complete another one. The Championship series is easier to complete because of its smaller size. I completed the 110-card set with just 14 fifty cent packages. Beware of the Championship packs, because although the cards are packed randomly, the same cards can turn up in consecutive packs, much like the Classic set from Titan Sports two years ago.

As for the packaging, Stomp cards do not actually say "Stomp Collection" anywhere on the packs or box, but they are in the more desirable cello packaging. The Championship packs are wax sealed, which among the collecting world is bad because the wax always blemishes the bottom card. The wrapping for the Championship cards is plain black and gold, bu the Stomp cards have a special offer for a free album with sheets in which to place the cards. A $19.95, better deals can be found.

Both companies offer free checklists t those who write them. I wrote and asked fo checklists and any information, such a a press kit, but they only sent a form letter and checklists. The checklist did come in handy, especially for th Championship cards, which do no come with checklists in the regula packs. The last two cards of the Stom series are checklists.

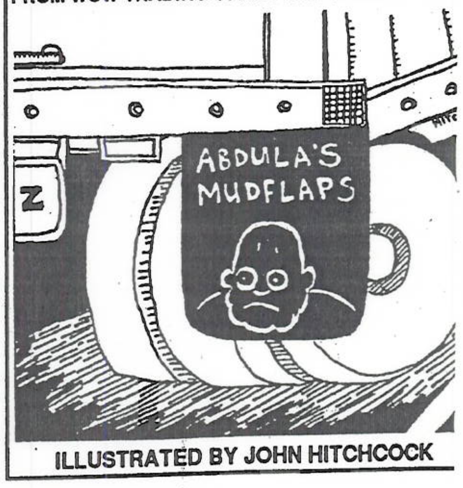
As far as future value, I do not se either of these sets appreciating ver much, so collect for the fun of it, not a an investment for your children' college education. There are 110 card to the series and another 110 pieces to puzzle, but there is only one puzzl piece per package. Most collectors ar likely to stop short of collecting the entire 11 piece puzzle. The puzzle is the same picture o the Steiners with their dog mentioned earlier.

Compared to Titan's previous effort both series are comparable despite WCW goin with relative unknowns in the sports card fiel compared to Titan's relationship with Classi Cards, a bigger company. Titan cards do n give as much information as the WCW cards, b the photo quality may be a little bit bette Overall, a fine effort by WCW in their first fora into the trading card industry.

If you want to purchase a complete s of puzzle cards or regular Championship card Championship Marketing's address is: Ball Fou 4732-D North Royal Atlanta Drive, Tucker, G. 30084. The Stomp collection set can be found i many hobby stores.

[Eric Krol is a college student from Orlar Hills, Illinois studying to be a Journalism Majc He frequently contributes to verious wrestlir newsletters.]

SEND IN TEN PROOFS OF PURCHASE SYMBOLS FROM WCW TRADING CARDS AND RECEIVE FREE



ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN HITCHCOCK

AUSTRALIA: A TOUR OF A LIFETIME

A COUNTRY WITHOUT PRO WRESTLING GETS A BIG DOS

BY MICK KARCH

It was a great pleasure and honor for me to accompany Rob Russen and his troupe of IWA wrestlers on this summer's excursion to the outskirts of Sydney, Australia. Having worked with Rob in the past on his cablecasts on SportsChannel America, and having had a great deal of contact with him during his tenure with the AWA in the Twin Cites, I was eager to be a part of the two-week stint at Australia's Wonderland, an amusement park very much like a mini-Disneyland, with my assignment to emcee and ring announce.

Professional wrestling was very popular in the Land Down Under in the 60's, 70's, and early 80's. However, for reasons still unclear to me, major tours of Australia ceased several years ago, to the point where the only "pro" wrestling available prior to the IWA visit was on an independent, small scale in club venues. Pro wrestling was even removed from television, so the fans were starved for major league wrestling action.

There was some concern among the wrestlers and even the promotion that due to the length of time without wrestling, that perhaps the fans would sit on their hands and be unresponsive to the action. Nothing was further from the truth, as right from the opening night to the final day, the fans were popping like wrestling had never left the area. It sounds almost condescending to call the crowds "easy," but that is exactly what they were. It did not take a lot of effort to get them worked into a frenzie.

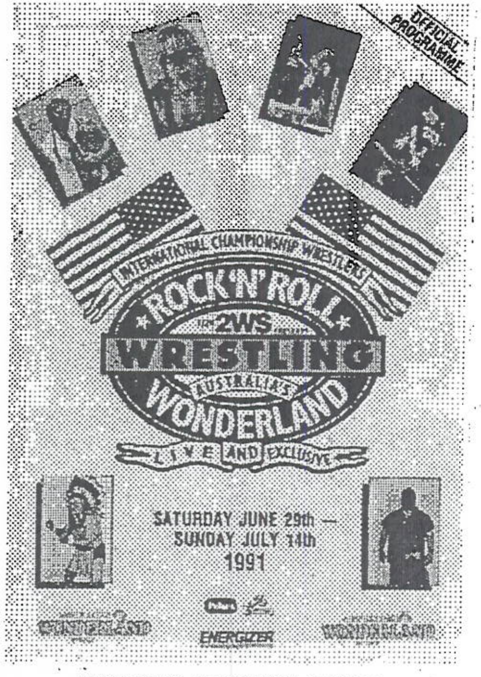
Before I detail some of the most interesting events of the tour and explain the setting a bit more, I think it is best to capsulize the wrestlers on the tour with a little bit of info on how they were received and what their individual roles were:

"Mr. Wonderful" Paul Orndorff: Paul was the most "over" fan favorite, bar none. his worldwide reputation certainly had made its way into Australia, and the crowds reacted to him instantly, and feverishly. He had great matches with Larry Cameron, Kimala, and Thunderfoot #1 (Davis Isley). Orndorff looked very sharp on this tour.

Kimala: The Aussies were enthralled with the big man. Accompanied, of course, by "Friday" (Sal Cornete), he was superb throughout our stay, and was the number one heel. Outside the ring, I developed a great friendship with him and can honestly say he is one of the funniest men I have ever met in the wrestling business.

Thunderfoots #1 & #2: That's Thunderfoots, not Thunderfeet. David Isley was #1 and Gene Ligon #2, and they were very, very impressive as the lead heel tag team. Ligon was seriously injured midway through the tour in a strange incident. He was stretching his leg over the top rope as part of a "stall" spot, when opponent Derrick Dukes shook the top ring rope, causing Ligon's hamstring to tear in the process. For all intents and purposes he was immobilized for the last half of our stay, able to participate only in an arm wrestling contest prior to our departure. Isley was great and drew some honest praise from Orndorff with whom he had several singles matches. Orndorff told me at one time, "I'd work with that kid every night of the week." Isley, Ligon, and I also became great friends on this trip. Ligon has an outstanding sense of humor and is vastly underrated, as is Isley. Ligon was lucky to get out of the ring alive one night when he grabbed the microphone and made fun of Aussie boxer Jeff Fenneck, who was robbed in a controversial decision against Azuma Nelson in the States.

Chief Jules Strongbow: The Chief has been in this business for twenty-two years now and we have known each other from the outset. He has gone from heel to face many times turning his career, and on this particular stint, he was a heel. And what a job he did. Nick Bockwinkel was his idol, and he made it a point of exaggerating many of the mannerisms and techniques that he had learned from Nick over the years, for my benefit. He won and lost the IWA's "Intercontinental" Title on this tour, winning it from Derrick Dukes and losing it to the man who held it upon our arrival, Preston Steele. One of the highlights of this stay for me was sitting and reminiscing about the AWA's glory days and road trips with the Chief. He is a helluva guy.



IWA TOUR PROGRAM COVER

Hillbilly Cousin Luke: I had met
Hillbilly (Gene Lewis) on previous trips witl
IWA. A very likeable guy, he was an instan
with the Australian crowd, though they certa
reacted far more strongly to the "Hillbilly
theme music than he did to Charlie Dan
Luke just about ended the career of young
LeRibeus (Rock Hard Rick, "The Gladiator
this tour) with a clothesline that literally kno
Rick unconscious. Luke himself missed a m
portion of the tour when he stepped w
getting out of a dressing room trailer
aggravated an old back injury so badly tha
was laid up for several days.

The Gladiator: As mentioned above,
poor guy was knocked senseless by a clothes
which saw him do a complete head over h
flip and land right on his head. Miraculousl
did not break his neck. A handsome, musc
athlete out of Texas, he was primarily a heel
the fans had a hard time booing him. So he
occasion to wrestle as a face, including sco
an upset, count-out, non-title victory over L
Cameron. Besides the above-mentioned inj
he was also involved in another bizarre e
He attacked Mark "The Terminator" Laurin
from behind with his "Gladiator Shield," w
was made of g
It shattered all
Laurinaitis's b
drawing blood
couple of pla
and scaring the
out of everyb
Laurinaitis wa
right beyond
few cuts, howe
Gladiator's gre
claim to fame
this trip, tho
came outside
ring. He ende
with the m
gorgeous wo
available, muc
the chagrin of
rest of us.

The Terminat
The Mas
Blaster:
aforementio
Laurinaitis tea
with Al Gr
(WCW's Ma
Blaster II), to f
a Legion of D
clone that certainly had the fans eating out o
palm of their hands. Though their actual
team appearances were few, each one of t
men were tremendously popular in sin
competition. Both are massive, particul
Green, who has to be seen to be believed
close. He had some stupendous matches

Larry Cameron, including their finale which saw them fighting down the aisles, into the seats, with chairs, tables, and everything else not bolted to the floor, all part of the warfare. If the Australian fans were hungry for action, Blaster and Cameron provided it to the fullest. Though both Green and Laurinaitis have been heels in the past, you would never know it on the Australian stint, as they were received with thunderous ovations every time they appeared. By the way, they picked on me unmercifully in the ring, in the hotel, on the plane, everywhere.

Lethal Larry Cameron: I have never seen Larry more imposing and more impressive than he was on this tour. I kept thinking to myself, if only the WWF or WCW could see this guy now. I always knew what Larry was capable of, but he outdid himself in Australia. The IWA's recognized World Heavyweight Champion, Larry brought the house down every time he appeared. The consummate heel, he successfully defended his championship for the entire stint, defending it against every one of the faces. His ring personna is without peer, and he is the most believable monster anywhere. Entering the arena area to the strains of "Iron Man" (LOD's old theme), Cameron was magnificent. His brawls with the Master Blaster were of three and four star quality. Outside the ring, he maintained an aura and a mystique about him befitting a champion. Larry Cameron came into his own in Australia, to say the least. Rob Russen knows it, I know it, and his peers on this tour know it. Now it is time for the rest of the world to recognize him. Nobody is more underrated and underappreciated by the mainstream than Larry Cameron.

"LETHAL" LARRY CAMERON
IWA WORLD CHAMPION

Derrick "Starfire" Dukes: The Dukester had a brief stint as IWA Intercontinental Champion, winning the belt from the masked Thunderfoot #1, but losing it to Jules Strongbow. The crowd popped big time when Dukes would dance his way into the ring to the sounds of M.C. Hammer. For the most part, a successful run Down Under for Derrick, whose aerial assault was crisp and thrilled the Aussies. On the down side, some occasional bouts of unexplainable mood shifts detracted somewhat, and lent credence to the theory that if Derrick can stay focused, he is capable of being a great one. Many of the ladies at the Huntley Hotel in Paramatta, just outside of Sydney, were certainly focused on Dukes, however.

Preston Steele: I really like this guy for a variety of reasons. First of all, he is sincere and committed to learning the wrestling business. He is eager to listen to advice, criticism, and input regarding his matches. Beyond that, he is a fun-loving character who has a tendency to believe his own "Ultimate Male" publicity, but in such a way that he is the target of good-natured ribbing from his fellow wrestlers (and announcers). He has only been in the sport for a handful of years, but entered the tour as the IWA Intercontinental (formerly the U.S.) Champion, dropping the strap early to Thunderfoot #1 and regaining it at the end of the tour from Jules Strongbow. If there is any problem here, it may be with image. While he is strictly a babyface, the nickname "Ultimate Male" and platinum blond locks present a far different first impression to the casual fan. About halfway through our stay, he asked me to drop the "Ultimate Male" tag from his intro, and it seemed to help. He was very popular with the ladies, both in and out of the ring. Matter of fact, they may have erected a "Preston Steele" wing on the second floor of the Huntley Hotel. Either that, or there is a "Police line, do not cross" barrier up there.

Noelle: The wife of IWA Commissioner Rob Russen (Lynn), she is a very pretty young lady who accompanies Steele to the ring as his manager and valet. At an opening day press conference for the Sydney news media, she was "abducted" by Larry Cameron, hauled out over his shoulders, causing a mini-riot that I'm sure they still remember. Originally from the Twin Cities, she married Rob a couple of years ago and the two moved to Florida. She is very amiable and has a great sense of humor, but I know she feels frustrated that at least on this tour, her role at ringside was very limited, almost to a cheerleader role. She would like to become more involved as an active, integral participant, and I agree. Hopefully on future tours and here in the States she will rise to a level not unlike the Sunshines, Elizabeths, and Sherris of the wrestling world.

Eric Russen: As I alluded to in a "Submission" column in a recent *Torch*, Eric generated tremendous crowd response, particularly from the teenage girls, He is a good looking, athletic kid who was one of two referees on the tour, even taking a couple of wicked bumps, considering that he is still developing and is relatively short in height. He improved greatly as a third man as the days went by, having started rather tentatively and building confidence along the way. He was also the subject of considerable ribbing (and probably jealousy , at least on my part) as he was hounded by these teenage groupies on a daily basis.

Sal Corrente: Sal doubled as a referee and "Friday," Kimala's interpreter on this tour. Without question, a unique individual, to say the least. You have to know Sal well to understand him. And the fact that I am beginning to understand him scares me. He is proud of his craft and takes pride in defending the wrestling business itself. What gets the hairs standing on everybody's neck is that Sal is opinionated beyond comprehension and has little time for anyone else's input. Purely and simply, he talks, you listen. I know more than one wrestler that was irate at that, but as time passed on the tour, I became aware that Sam is really a character, and that you take what he says with a grain of salt. I had some very, very funny moments with him, and to be perfectly honest, developed an increasing respect for him. Unless you experience actually working with him, you just cannot imagine what he is like. One of a kind with a very sharp mind for angles, as well.

> "Mick, in twenty-two years in this business, I have never seen anything like what happened on this tour. Wrestlers becoming emotionally attached to people, sobbing like babies when it came time to leave! We're not supposed to do that."

Rob Russen: This is a strange business, this wrestling game. You meet so many individuals along the way, some of them not so honest. That is why working with Rob is such a treat. He is straight-forward, takes care of his people, is up-front, and has a great deal of integrity when it comes to finances, commitments, and promises. I feel very fortunate to being chosen to work with the IWA as their ring announcer on this tour and can say nothing but good things about Rob Russen. He willingly accepted my input, often seeking it, and above all else, his relationship with his wrestlers is more as "one of the boys," rather than putting himself in the old "office vs. worker" light. He is a sharp businessman who knows how to put a quality, successful show together, and I wish him years of success in this business.

Some Tour Facts: The matches were held in a "big top" type tent on the grounds of Wonderland. Seating capacity was 2500 and I would guess that in 90 percent of the cases, the tent was filled. Generally speaking, two shows were held per day, at 1:00 PM and 3:00 PM with each show running approximately 45 minutes, enough for two or three matches. In a couple of instances, a third show was added when attendance at the Park itself indicated that it would be successful. There was even a "wrestling souvenir booth" set up not far from the tent where IWA t-shirts, polo shirts, sweatshirts, buttons, and other wrestling merchandise were hot sellers.

To kick off the tour, I emceed the press conference at the Regency Hotel in Sydney, with members of the Australian media attending, not only from Sydney, but from Melbourne, as well. The purpose of the press conference was to introduce the wrestlers and officials and give a bit of background about the IWA itself. The wrestlers were celebrities, to be sure, appearing on the Australian equivalent of "Good Morning America," "Today," and "CBS This Morning." They also appeared on radio talk shows.

All of us were treated like gold throughout

(AUSTRALIA continued on page 88)

"THE PUSH"

A Short Story By Joseph Perry

Paddy and I were both excited about our match that night. It was the main event of one of those pay-per-view cable events that get televised all over the world. Wrestleromp VI, it was called. It was Paddy's last match before retiring. it was "preordained," as he put it, that he would retire his World Heavyweight Championship belt without ever being pinned in his thirty-year career.

Paddy's real name was Sean Patterson, but he was known and hated by millions as The Belfast Bomber. He really was from Belfast. Most of the wrestlers who are supposed to be Russian, German, or Samoan were born and raised in unexotic places like New Jersey or Montana. But not Paddy. He was Irish through and through. He missed his home, which he had not seen since he first came to the States in 1958.

I got into pro wrestling just about two years ago. Paddy instantly took me under his wing. "I took a liking to you right away, boy, because you're the only one who seems to be interested in an old man's stories," he once told me. He really was not old, in his late fifties, but most wrestlers do put the boots away by then and start selling insurance or work for beer distribution places and things like that. But not The Belfast Bomber. "I'll keep irritating them for as long as they'll let me," he told me back then.

Paddy trained me, showed me how to land when I got thrown around, how to cut your forehead with a razor so nobody sees you, little tricks like that. He loved the sport, damn it, more than anyone else I knew. So it really surprised me when he told me that he was going to retire. "Boy, I just can't seem to keep up anymore. I guess it's time to admit I'm getting too old for this business. But you've been a real friend to me, and I want you to be my opponent in my last match."

Like I said, I was shocked. Paddy was doing me a real favor, though. I spent my first year wrestling as a prelim jobber, losing to every bad guy that stepped into the ring with me. Then I graduated to mid-card status, winning decisions over guys who were about to jump federations when their contracts expired. This retirement match would be a big boost for me.

So we spent two months before the match hyping it. I challenged Paddy to the title on national TV. He slapped my face and we brawled until reinforcements showed up from the locker room; all that stuff. We would all yell at each other on TV interviews, then go out and have a few beers afterwards. He was not just my mentor, he was my friend.

Well, the big night came and everybody in the locker room was in a great mood, helping Paddy celebrate before his last match. "Jesus Christ, Pad, thirty years without being pinned," Bob Nathan - Krusher Kraven was his pro name - said. "You're a legend. I don't know how you ever talked the bookers into it."

"Seniority, Bob," Paddy answered, and we all laughed. "No, it's true. I've been in the sport longer than most of those pencil-pushers that decide our every move, and I always told them, you want to keep me, you play by my rules or I walk. Well, before they tell me the pasture's waiting for me, I'll retire undefeated and be a thorn in the fans' sides forever." Everybody cheered. Bob slapped him on the back.

"How about you, Scott?" Mike "Chief Brave Eagle" Forest asked me. "The whole world finds out who you are tonight when The Bomber takes your mask off. Aren't you going to feel naked without it?"

"I guess I really hadn't thought about it, `cause I've been so excited for Paddy," I replied. "I guess unmasking The Usurper will have the fans in an uproar even more. Shit, B.B., they're going to want your blood."

"They've had enough of that in the past," Paddy said. "Back in the old days..."

"Oh, no, I knew this was coming," interrupted Pedro "The Interloper" Gomez, laughing, but meaning it.

"Listen, now. After tonight you won't have my stories to listen to anymore and you'll miss `em then," Paddy shot back. "You young fellas have it easy, sure. Been pampered and coddled by the boys upstairs with big fat contracts so long you've lost sight of the sport. Sweet Jesus, what wrestler in his right mind twenty, thirty years ago would have thought the sport would become a damned family entertainment. It's more spectacle than sport now. You boys spend more time yelling at the camera for interviews than you do in the squared circle. And TV... I remember when the local stations would film us whenever we came around and stick the show on Saturday afternoons when advertising was cheap. Now wrestling is goddamn primetime entertainment!"

What Paddy said was all true. I remember watching wrestling - Big Time Wrestling, it was called back then - eighteen years ago, when I was a fourth grader. My dad would jump out of his chair, yell at the wrestlers on the TV screen, and if the bad guy won, swear up and down that it was all fake. Sure, I've always known that it was a work, even as a ten-year-old, but it's also real within its own little world. Like a lot of things, I guess.

Wrestling was different back then. The glitz and schlock were on a much smaller scale, and the violence played a more important role than it does today. Back then, guys really would eat live fish to prove that they were "crazy." The physical contact was so intense that broken bones and deep gashes were just part of the job hazards. One guy even lost an ear in a match, I swear to god. But now that wrestling is a "marketable commodity," all that has changed. The aggressiveness has been watered down so much that drawing blood is reserved only for occasional cable TV events. No believable violence during primetime TV, that's the rule. And the hype is ridiculous. Wrestlers have always been caricatures of stereotypes - the wily Japanese, the crafty, ruthless German, the wild man of the tropical islands - but now they're littl more than caricatures of caricatures. That's wha had Paddy so low. He was a purist, and the thin that he loved most in the world was slowly bein taken over by "goddam charlatans," as he put it.

The other guys left the dressing room to ea dinner, but Paddy stayed. I noticed that h looked really down, so I stayed behind, too. knew it must have been tough for him, what wit giving up the only thing he really knew an loved. He never did marry or have kids or any c that. He'd told me he was a lady's man once, b that was years ago.

"Scotty, my boy," he said, "when I reti that title tonight, I'll feel like I'm betraying th old guard. There aren't that many more of th old-timers like me around. Some that are shou have called it quits long ago. But the old fans a still out there, and they cling to the san memories I do. I feel like there's no one to car on the old traditions, to fight those goddamn charlatans upstairs. Another year or two a there won't be any more matches, just a lot hoopla with nothing getting solved. They p these young fellas out of the wrestling camps a the training schools and by then, the poor ki are so hungry for a buck that they'll do anythi the big-wigs tell `em to."

"I know, Paddy, I know." I didn't feel li I'd be very successful at consoling him.

"That's why I'm so thankful for you, b You've got the same stars in your eyes that I when I first started out. I just hope this busin - Jesus, that's the first time I've ever called sport a business - is good to you, `cause damn well deserve it." His eyes started to watery, and I could feel a lump coming on in throat. "Come on, Pad, let's get some grub," was all I could say without crying like a little kid.

The preliminary matches pissed, and we were just a few minutes away from our big match. I put on my mask and looked in the dressing room mirror. Tonight will be the last night I wear this thing, I thought, but big deal, tonight's the last night Paddy will ever wear that belt. Before I could think too much about it, I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Let's go, kid," Paddy said softly.

Paddy stared straight down the aisle to the ring as the announcer began the introductions. I looked at all six-feet, five inches and 260 pounds of him. He wore the scars from the lumps he had taken like armor. He was still in good shape for a guy his age. He hadn't let himself go like some of the older guys. Corporal Punishment for instance. A former lean, mean superstar of the seventies, now a fat 317-pounder who was reduced to being a ham-and-egger, doing jobs for guys half his age. I slapped Paddy on his muscular back. "Well, I guess you won't have to bleach your hair anymore after tonight, huh, Champ?" The corners of his mouth turned up slightly . Paddy began the long walk.

As soon as he stepped out from the dressing room area, the boos thundered through the arena. Paddy just walked on like he always did, acting arrogant and superior, pretending not to be bothered by any of the insults directed towards him. Paddy loved this recognition, loved every person in the building for hating The Belfast Bomber so much. He stepped into the ring and held his championship belt high in the air for all to see. This taunting only made their show of hatred louder.

The announcer waited for the noise to level off. "And now, the challenger, weighing in at 237 pounds, from Parts Unknown, The Usurper!" I walked out to roaring cheers and applause, to shouts of "Kill the old bum!" "Don't let him retire with the belt!" "Cripple him, Usurper! Give him something to think about while he's lying on his fat ass in Florida!" Comments like that always made me upset when they were directed at Paddy, but he always told me, "Remember, they're shouting at the Belfast Bomber, not Sean Patterson."

As I approached the ring, Paddy - the Bomber - signalled that he was going to take my mask off. The crowd booed again. I signaled that I was going to wear the belt, and the place went nuts. I stepped into the ring, and we stared each other down. The sadness in the eyes of Paddy had given way to the intensity in the eyes of the Belfast Bomber.

The bell sounded and the match got underway. We gave the fans their money's worth, tossing each other around like yesterday's garbage. He'd bodyslam me, I'd retaliate with a suplex. He'd monkeyflip me, I'd gorilla press him. I rammed his head into the steel post, he hit me over the head with a metal folding chair.

The match went on for a good thirty minutes, just like we planned. That's another thing Paddy used to complain about. "Nobody wants to work anymore. Used to be we'd wrestle for a good thirty, forty minutes. Hell, even an hour sometimes. Now these new kids think fifteen minutes is a long match. So do the fans. I feel sorry for `em."

Anyway, we were only a few minutes away from the finish. Paddy suddenly ripped my mask off, just as planned. Needless to say, the place was in an uproar. This heinous act supposedly drove me to a furor, and the Usurper fought the Bomber for all I was worth.

I bodyslammed the Bomber, and climbed to the top turnbuckle. I stood high up there, much to everyone's delight. Once I applied my finishing move, the shooting star press, I would become the new champion and the Bomber would not return undefeated. But that's not the way it was booked. When I jumped, the Bomber would roll out of the way, I'd "hurt" my knee, and he'd slap on his figure-four leglock, forcing me to submit in a fit of pain.

I leapt off the turnbuckle, higher than usual to make it look really good. I aimed towards my supposed target, the Belfast Bomber's torso. Paddy moved, but not the way he was supposed to. My knee hit him full on the throat, and I could feel a sickening crush under the weight of my leg.

The crowd yelled for me to pin him, but I was paralyzed. All I could do was stare down at him lying there. The medics came right away, knowing this wasn't in the plans. The other wrestlers poured out of the dressing room. I didn't hear what any of them were saying, but the Chief and Pedro helped me out of the ring and down the aisle. All I remember now is walking to the dressing room with the fans chanting "U-sur-per! U-surp-er!" Didn't they know? My god, couldn't they tell?

Everything right after that is still a blur. I know that the other guys tried to console me, but I didn't hear a word. One of the medics came in and confirmed what I already knew - Paddy was dead.

I cried like a baby when we found out for sure. I wanted to smash something, but I was too drained. The other guys left so I could be by myself. I just sat there, my head in my hands, and cried.

A while later, the Chief came back in. "Scott, bigwigs on the phone for you. They said I could take a message, but they want to know if you'd rather talk to them."

"No, go ahead," I muttered. "Take it."

He left, and returned a few minutes later. "They want you to fly to the offices tomorrow. President himself wants to speak with you about tonight. Says not to worry about legal action anything, didn't really say much else. You want me to go with you?"

"No, thanks, Chief," I said. "I'll go it alone. No reason to screw up our schedule, too."

"Right. Well, then, kid, you gonna be all right?"

"Yeah. Fine. Thanks, Chief." I don't know how long I just sat there thinking. I don't even remember how I got back to my hotel room.

The flight to the offices seemed a lot longer than it was. The whole time I wondered about when and where they were going to bury Paddy, and who was going to pay for it. I also wondered what I was going to do with myself. I new that there was no way I could step back into the ring, not after last night. Besides, they were probably flying me in to offer me hush money and my pink slip. I guess I could always go home to Martin's Ferry, get a job at one of the mills or something. It'd be hard going back to Ohio after seeing so much of the country on tour, though.

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The plane touched down, and the bigwigs had a limo - a frickin' limo - waiting for me at the airport. I thought of the old joke. "Who do you have to kill to ride in one of those?" I almost smiled, but got a lump in my throat.

Fred Horsey, one of the corporate hotshots, rode with me to the main office. Paddy used to call it the "Main Orifice, `cause everyone who works there is an asshole." Fred was from the legal department, and he reassured me not to worry about lawsuits or anything. Funny, that stuff never even crossed my mind until these guys brought it up. Vultures. Only worried about the next buck. Fred told me that the federation was going to pay for all of the funeral expenses, not to worry about a thing. I asked him why the president of the federation wanted to see me, but he just told me I'd find out soon enough. And told me again not to worry about anything. I don't need to tell you that I was worried.

We arrived at the president's office. The secretary, a pretty blonde number who used to be lady wrestlers back when the federation still had lady wrestlers, told me that Mr. Schuler was expecting me. Horsey motioned me to go on in alone, and I did.

Mr. Schuler couldn't have been any friendlier. "Come in, my boy, sit down. Relax. You must be feeling terrible about last night." Good thinking on your part, I thought to myself. That's why you're sitting in this big fancy office while the rest of us toss each other around every night. "You know, I'm deeply grieved. Sean was a real asset to the sport." Christ, that remark made me mad. And nobody ever called Paddy "Sean," for God's sake. Shows how little this jerk knows. And an asset? Try a legend, asshole.

Schuler went on, while I half listened. Tragic loss, blah blah blah. Tragic accident, blah blah blah. Litigation not a problem, blah blah blah. He must have talked for twenty minutes straight, while I just looked out the window. Then he got out of his chair and turned his back to me while he, too, looked out a window. "Scott, let's talk about the real reason I asked you to fly out here."

"Don't worry, sir," I told him. "I've done some thinking about it, and I won't raise a stink about quitting. You don't even have to ask me. There's no way I could ever wrestle again."

"What!?" he blurted out as he spun around to face me. "Quit? You must be joking! You must be fucking nuts!"

"I wanted to throw him right out the window, I swear I did. Instead I just got the hell up and walked right out of his office, straight past his secretary and shit-for-brains lawyer. Didn't say a word to either of them."

I was dumbfounded at his outburst. What the hell else would he have expected out of me but to quit? "I don't understand," is all I could stammer out.

"Jesus Christ, kid, you've got this sport by the balls! You're not some ham-and-egger, some mid-card never-will-be anymore. You are now The Man Who Killed the Belfast Bomber, the most hated son of a bitch in wrestling for thirty frickin' years! Nobody could ever pin him, but you, kid, you did even better than that. You killed him in his goddam retirement match!"

My head was spinning in total confusion. "I don't get it," I said. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm trying to tell you that, as of last night's pay-per-view event, you are the hottest property in the hottest professional wrestling federation in the world. We're talking unlimited potential for marketability! You can become the most popular wrestler ever! Bigger than Ric Flair. Hell, bigger than Hogan, even! And you're talking about fuckin' quitting?"

My blood boiled. Paddy wasn't even dead a day yet and this prick in a polyester suit was trying to capitalize on my accidentally killing him! I wanted to strangle him, but all I could do was stare at him. "I'm not the one who's nuts, you asshole. You are! You are, if you think I'd cheapen Paddy's death like that. Shit, man, you are low."

"Don't give me ethics, kid," he yelled. "I've had it up to my ears with ethics. That's not what this game is all about. This integrity shit is a thing of the past. Sure, you're all fired up about it now, but just think what would happen to you if you quit. Where would you go? What would you do? Flip burgers for a living until you got old and tried to tell people that you were once somebody, The Man Who Killed the Belfast Bomber? Hell, by then, you'll have been long forgotten and so will he. I'm giving you a chance to become fucking immortal! Don't piss it away!"

I wanted to throw him right out the window, I swear I did. Instead I just got the hell up and walked right out of his office, straight past his secretary and shit-for-brains lawyer. Didn't say a word to either of them.

I walked around for a while, thinking about Paddy and what happened and what Schuler had said. I wondered what Paddy would have done if he were in my shoes. As I calmed down, I wondered if he would have stopped everything or if he would have tried to carry on the old-time traditions he loved so well.

I kept on walking. Maybe I should keep wrestling, do what would have made Paddy proud of me, I thought. Be one of the few wrestlers left who did it out of love for the sport and not for the money.

I walked into a bar for a beer. It was one of those fancy sports bars that lawyers, businessmen, and other rich stiffs hang out in. I pulled up a seat at the bar and ordered a draught. I was glad the place was empty.

"Here you are," the bartender said as he handed he a glass. He stared at me, then smiled. "Hey, you're that wrestler, The Usurper, aren't you?" My heart sank. "Yeah, we watched that match here last night. They only showed your face for a little while after the old guy pulled your mask off, but let me tell you something, buddy, it's sure been all over the news today! Jesus, you guys made that shit look real. Probably fooled a lot of people, too, huh?"

I drained the glass in one tilt. "Yeah," I said, "fooled a lot of people." I paid for the drink and walked away.

"Hey," the bartender yelled after me. "Can I get you to autograph something? You're gonna be a legend, what with faking the old champ's death!" I wanted to grab the skinny idiot by his collar and shake some sense into him. Instead, I walked over to him quietly, took a pen out of his hand, and signed a bar napkin, "Scott Pollard - formerly The Usurper."

[Joseph Perry of Sacramento, CA is publisher and editor of the bi-weekly wrestling newsletter *Turnbuckle: A Wrestling Forum* at $1.50 an issue from P.O. Box 191425, Sacramento, CA 95819-1425 which features editorials, match reports, news updates, and interviews. Joseph Perry is also scheduled to receive his Master's Degree in English: Concentration in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University in the fall semester of 1991. He has had work appear in several poetry publications, some of which are even reputable. Besides his newsletter, he also publishes the poetry magazine, *Sisyphus Poetry Quarterly*.]

(AUSTRALIA continued from page 85)

our stay. We were fed well, given sight-seeing tours, and even chauffeured by limousine to the grand opening of a multi-million dollar disco, "In Vogue."

The first actual wrestling event consisted of a private showing, just for the media and Wonderland employees and their families. They were treated to a battle royal which saw Paul Orndorff and Derrick Dukes the last two remaining in the ring, sharing the victory. During the two-week stint, fans saw battle royals, strap matches, arm wrestling contests, taped fist matches, splash matches, and no disqualification bouts - a literal gourmet feast of mayhem. The crowds were always "warmed up" beforehand, as the sound system would blast Queen's "We Will Rock You" moments before I would enter the ring for the customary "Let's see how much noise you can make" intro. It was a great kick to see so much continued enthusiasm.

Some of my personal "awards" as I look back on the tour.

Most Popular: Paul Orndorff. The cheers were deafening for him.

Least Popular: Kimala, although the Thunderfoots and Jules Strongbow could make a case for themselves as well. The only time Kimala may have slipped from his heelish perch was when he would give the fans the "thumbs up" sign after he threw his opponent from the ring.

Most Unpredictable: The Terminator and The Master Blaster. Simply imposing and occasionally frightening, you always looked over your shoulder when these two were around, no matter where it was.

Best Dancer: Kimala. You should have seen his 400-pound frame on the various dance floors around Sydney. He indicated to me this was the first tour he had ever been on where he was not forced to "kayfabe." He made the most of it.

Memorable Quote: Kimala, again, seated at a bar and having downed his fourth double shot in five minutes: "My glass must have a hole in the bottom."

Scariest Moment: When The Gladiator was knocked unconscious in his match with Cousin Luke. We really thought he was in serious trouble. His neck was completely sandwiched when he landed on his head after taking the clothesline.

Luckiest Moment: Gladiator has to take a second spot. I had the luckiest moment. At one point during our stay, Park officials allowed us to have our photos taken holding a live koala bear. I was one of the few that the bear didn't defecate on as the photo was being taken.

All in all, this tour was one of the great highlights of my life. So many wonderful friends were made, so many good times shared, that it was difficult to leave. As a matter of fact, if you can imagine this, on the morning we left, the hotel lobby was filled with wrestlers and hotel staff hugging and crying, not wanting to say goodbye. It prompted Jules Strongbow, the time-tested veteran of this sport and of so many tours all over the world to comment on the long, grueling flight back to the states:

"Mick, in twenty two years in this business, I have never seen anything like what happened on this tour. Wrestlers becoming emotionally attached to people, sobbing like babies when it came time to leave! We're not supposed to do that."

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